

Stormwave always hated the rain.

The reasons for this dislike were as numerous as the droplets that now fell upon her shoulders. Memories of days long past, flashes of a childhood she would rather forget, tainted the canvas of memory along with the shadowed city streets. The heavy peal of water on stone, dripping from towering buildings a century old, cast her mind into a reverie as long as the endless shadows. Years of her life crept silently through a darkness she couldn't penetrate with eyes alone, specters of people since lost and ones yet to discover. She couldn't help but fall into the spiral of thought, her mind betraying her as a moment of obscuring noise drowned out the world.

The endless pitter patter of falling water consumed all other sound, from her own footsteps to the cry of late-night cars.

Streets of Union City were not something she was accustomed to; they were darker than those ones back home. The lights of employees, kept far too late by corporate overlords who grew fat off their labor, were the main source of sight for the wayward heroine. The umbral shroud covered the remaining glow in a muted palette of dark and dull, reducing what may have been brighter hues to the monotonous blanket of age-worn steel and soaked through stone. Generations of life were covered in a cityscape that felt practically ancient in its modernity, a growth across a layout that never once been rebuilt in living memory. Those who lived here spoke fondly of the world that never changed, a rock to put their lives upon.

"Weird place." the girl muttered, hand running over one of the rivers of rain as it cascaded down a support girder. It split where it struck, rushing around the obstacle before joining a few inches down.

Horizon was so different; brighter and newer. Though their weather was similar, with both seemingly being port cities, there was a difference in the air so stark it was palpable. She could almost feel the weight of a city that carried so much history, a place devoid of the colorful sentinels that were so known where she came from. It was not so much a lack of hope, though some could construe this feeling as mere hopelessness, but it felt more tired. As if the walls she passed were saying it, again and again. One chorus that never ended, a thought that didn't change. Something she had never seen in her home city, words etched into the life of a place so far from the jewel of the future Horizon claimed to be.

We've seen it all before, and we will remain.

"Seriously, though." the out of town looked over a railing at the few passing cars. The bridge she walked upon rattled as a train, filled with the scant few midnight passengers, carried on above. "What the hell is this?"

It wasn't the city itself that intruded in her thoughts, not this time.

Rather, it was the suit that hung from her fingers, clinging to the gloved digits like glue yet shining like rubber. She couldn't even guess what this seemingly inanimate thing was and yet she knew there was more to the zippered costume. It swayed slightly in a breeze she didn't feel anymore, its heavy gauge material weighing just a little heavier than it should. Had she not worn as much of the material herself, she might have not noticed the difference. It would have just seemed like yet another rubber suit, a costume some kinky person or hazmat engineer might have worn for their own use.

But that wasn't what she'd seen a bit ago.

“Oh wow! You found one of ‘em, huh? What a *catastrophe!*” came a voice from behind the traveling hero, energetic and utterly devoid of worry.

Stormwave took one deep breath in, closed her eyes, and let it out. She had to calm herself from the inevitable.

“Oh my god he’s going to be a cat, isn’t he? They always are. No one else would talk like that.” she muttered below her breath.

“Sorry, you’ll have to speak up. This rain makes it *inclawsible* to hear you.”

Yup, cat. She thought to herself before turning to look at her nighttime intruder.

When she did, she saw the expected in every way. A rubber cat, clearly from a similar material as the suit hanging from her hand, covered in tiny streams of rain water. His body was clearly defined without being too large, enough to hint at the fact that he was more agile or stronger than he let on. Little drops came from a set of claws, small but menacingly sharp, that moved over to scratch the same support she’d touched moments ago. Every movement he took was full of the typical grace of a feline who actually worked out, deliberate and yet playful. He looked like a coiled spring that had been pushed down to strike and, despite that, still retained a playful air that didn’t threaten so much as simply promised mischief.

But what truly got her were those eyes. Bright, glowing, green eyes. A spot of color in a darkened world.

“Hm.”

“Sorry, *cat* got your-”

“You’re going to eat those puns with a straw in five minutes.”

“Aww, c’mon. We’re just having some fun! Just *kitten* around, no harm in-”

Faster than even the glossy cat would have expected, the wandering superhero turned and crossed the distance with barely a splash to mark her moment of dynamism. All of those well trained muscles flexed at once to throw the most powerful opening punch she could think of, striking firmly enough to knock most of her villains out cold without resistance. Rattling the unsuspecting head was going to be a good way to take him down.

“Gah!”

There was definitely impact but it just felt *wrong*, like she was punching something that was only there. The moment his head distended around her fist and his eyes bugged out like one of those shows from years before her birth added to the uncanny feeling of not right-ness. Even the fact that he fell from his feet and hit the ground over a yard away made it worse. Stormwave rarely carried enough power in her blows to really impact someone that badly, usually only when she added a burst of electricity. So this wasn’t her.

“Oh no! Is this the end of Charlie Cat?” he cried from the ground, one hand outstretched. “Find out next time on-”

“God *damnit*, you’re like Proxy.” she said with a sigh, already feeling the chronic headache from dealing with a living cartoon character. These were the worst. “Get up and let me hit you again. Won’t work but, well, might salvage the night.”

“Me-OW! That was one heck of a hit, girly!” the cat laughed as he pushed off the ground with an audible sproing that completely didn’t fit the city he was in. He shook the water off with a shiver through his body that might have worked better had he had actual fur but still splattered everything, making it more wet. “But you know, I sure feel like a superhero! Why don’t we just team up?”

“Not sure who or what you are but, hero? Nah.” Stormwave flicked her wrist, talking as she took mental inventory of what was going on. “Saw one of these suit things trying to eat someone. So... figure that’s your deal, right? Everyone’s got a gimmick. Mine’s being awesome and kicking ass. Yours is lame puns.”

She narrowed her eyes as he gave some weak quip, proving her right, and kept thinking over what she knew of this situation.

The main thing was that he, like one of her villains back home, seemed to be a living cartoon or something. His reactions and weird outline confirmed that he was far from a natural person. This Charlie Cat seemed to be some chaotic element that looked like he was wearing a suit, like what she carried, but there was no zipper for removal. Maybe they consumed their wearers or corrupted them in some way? That wasn’t unrealistic in this world, particularly with a creature like him looking at her. Being that he seemed almost cognizant, if not stupid, she would guess he might have some influence or be a stronger version.

“But! Hey!” Charlie laughed a bit more as he rolled his shoulders, creating a very notable series of unrealistic popping noises that almost sounded like they were a pre-recorded sound bite. “You’re trying to beat up the mane character here, so... gonna need to stop you!”

“I heard that one.” Stormwave sighed once more, shaking her head. Water splashed off in heavy streaks. “I’m going to hurt you twice as much for that one.”

A few minutes later and Stormwave found herself flung down some stairs, her hand catching a rail before flipping back to her feet where she splashed to a stop in a small pool of water.

“Hate these guys...” she muttered, watching as the hyper agile cartoon cat *thing* threw himself down the path towards her.

She was struggling to come up with the way to beat him while avoiding quick claw strikes but was coming up blank. The whole situation was stacked pretty heavily against her; an unknown opponent and weather that didn’t let her use her powers to their fullest. It was a blessing, at least, that they weren’t inside but she couldn’t control electricity when she was so thoroughly soaked. If she had some time, or enough power, she could try and dry off but that would take some time. That mostly left punching and wind bursts on an annoyingly stretchy boy.

“Aww, what’s wrong? C’mon, you seem a bit slow!” he laughed once more as he took a swing towards the psionic hero, missing by an inch as she backpedaled. “You know what they say. Cats are fast!”

“Yeah, too bad you’re not good at fighting.” the brawler chuckled a little bit as she snapped a leg up, kicking the cat in the side. It threw him aside but didn’t actually do any damage. Felt good, though. “Try training. Wearing that little costume is just cheating.”

Charlie paused for a moment as he thought about that, his eyes glowing a faintly different color. That was unexpected. Had she hit a nerve?

“I mean, c’mon. You’re just wearing some suit.” Stormwave continued to move on him suddenly, grabbing at the collar on his neck. His quick dodge left her fingers to jingle the glowing accessory just a little bit. “Just pretending to be a cat.”

“Maybe I’m...” Charlie whispered as his voice actually changed a little bit. A little look around had him confused at the sight, like he’d never seen the lithe form he’d

adopted. His claws flexed a little bit before he spoke again. "I'm a cat? Wasn't I something..."

That was the plan; confidence. Most of these creatures, costume or stupid shark cartoon, were driven by their plans and how assured they were. Having him take a second to second guess what was up, particularly with him not seeming to be fully aware of who he was, would give a second for real damage. It was hard to manipulate reality when you were stuck thinking about inside, not out. Two steps and a powerful punch to the face would-

"Nah, I *cat* think about that stuff now!" Charlie laughed as he caught the hand in the most typical superhero style. The rubbery hand stretched just a bit as his personality seemed to come back to the surface. "I don't need to remove the suit... I mean, my skin! That'd be crazy!"

And he suddenly tugged Stormwave forward by her hand, twisting to wrap about the wrist. They were suddenly nose to nose, his eyes narrowing a little while hers went wide with shock.

"Crazy like a fox."

Stormwave grunted a second later as she hit the wall, her balance completely ruined by his sudden onslaught. Any attempt at getting him to think again was completely ruined by his seemingly single minded focus on taking down the vigilante. Though she might be fast, his unnatural speed was enough to continuously rush and strike, keeping her from spending more than a moment to get back in position. It was only by sheer skill that she was even avoiding most of his attacks at this point.

"Aww, c'mon, whoever you are." Charlie jumped atop one of those old style, wrought iron trash cans and took the usual cat pose on his haunches. "You were doing so good! Bet you can get one more lick in, right?"

"Hate saying it. You're... not bad." she muttered and weighed her options.

Losing was definitely out of the question, she thought without needing confirmation. Letting someone this insane run around a city would be a bad thing and, with his unnatural powers, who knew what would happen even if she kept fighting? Throwing down with something so metaphorically slippery was difficult and irritating at the best of times. Unlike Proxy, she didn't know his weak spots or how to really trick him.

"Aww, thank you. Ya know, it's so much fun playing with other heroes!"

The one option she had to win was something she really didn't want to do; trying the costume she'd grabbed earlier and had somehow not let go yet. Was it held by a belief that she'd need it later? Maybe, but she didn't question what possessed her to keep the probably predatory suit for so long. All she could think about was how it would help her out. It had seemed to give Charlie Cat so much power, what would it do if worn by someone like her? Could it give her an edge over him?

"Still not a hero." she muttered before looking down at the costume, particularly at the collar. It came free of the suit easily enough though it still dripped with inky black rubber. Take a deep breath, lift it up to her own neck.

"Wait, what are you doing!"

"See you in a sec, cat." Stormwave smirked as she spoke, looking at the visibly spooked cat.

The suit in her hand quickly turned to liquid and slipped up her arms in heavy strings of rubber. Every passing second had it quickly consume more of her visible skin under a heavy sheen of black and dull brown. It seemed to adjust around the parts of her skin or suit it touched and copied some of the color, rewriting itself into a darker and more dusky shade of her own hues. It even looked like a little bit of her suit was being converted into the rest, though quickly joining the leotard design that graced Charlie's body. Lightning blue connected across her chest before vanishing under the jacket. That was one of the only parts that had managed to survive the encroaching costume before it wrapped against her neck.

It was only a few seconds before the whole thing covered her body up, wrapping her head and making even her hair fake. The resemblance to her hero suit was unexpected but not perfect; definitely a new look that she would have to get used to. It sure felt different to be wearing boots with freed paws instead of the conservative boots from her hero suit and...

Wow, this felt weird.

"Whoa, this is... heh..." Zyla reached up and gave her face a tug forward, stretching out the muzzle before letting it snap back with a loud *twang*. A strange euphoria started to wash over her mind before she realized something. "Wait, my ears are..."

"No!" Charlie stepped forward and stomped once, visibly irritated by the sight. "Not a bunny! Take that off!"

"Bunny?" Stormwave reached up and touched the tall, pointy ears as a sense of dread washed over her. The feeling of something akin to that dummy bunny she lived with was definitely irritating but whatever this costume was made it hard to focus on. Negativity was just so hard to keep track of! "I'm a... bunny?"

"I said!" Charlie crouched down and coiled himself up nice and tight. "Take off that suit!"

His lunge was faster than anything he'd done during their preliminary fight. If he'd been this focused early on, he might have actually made more hits on Stormwave before she'd gotten dressed up in her new powers. The little streak of rubber cat was barely visible on the cameras, much less those watching, and his claws glinted with dangerous intent. Their keen edges lashed through the air for the bunnified heroine, aiming to slice the costume from her strip by strip.

Except she wasn't there anymore.

"Hah!" Stormwave laughed as she grabbed the cat's tail and gave it a tug, tossing him across the subway station. "Better hop to it, right?"

Charlie grunted as he hit the wall, finally feeling something. Was it because they were two zipsuits together? Why did the name zipsuit suddenly get into his head? There wasn't a costume on him. He's just Charlie Cat, the best ever. Faster, stronger, cooler than everyone.

And this bunny was trying to stop that!

"You gotta be kidding me." He shook his head to clear it as the playfulness started to bubble back to the surface. It sure was hard to stay that upset but the little bits of anger kept him focused. "Don't worry, hero! I'll get you out of that suit! Because I'm-"

"Too slow?"

“Wait, wha-” Charlie turned around as he heard the words from behind him, eyes going as huge as literal saucers.

Stormwave’s finger rested on his nose as he caught a sight of the manic grin, her eyes locked right on his. How the hell she’d managed to move so fast as to completely get past his senses was beyond even the cartoonish cat. She must have moved with some impossible speed, either from her original form or the fact that she was a cartoon rabbit now. Was that faster than cat? The rock-paper-scissors game of species transfiguration was not explained in the instructions for these suits! He took a quick swipe of his claws to push her away before realizing something.

Suits? What suit? Wasn’t he just...

“Whoatooslowstillhuh?” the rabbit spoke so quickly he could barely make it out as she hopped up and kicked off the wall with her newly empowered legs, twisting and turning before landing nearby. “Ding ding.”

Stormwave’s mind was awash with an incredible buzz as she reached into her new powers and simply *made* something happen. The boxing gloves that suddenly covered her hands were perfect for the moment Charlie felt the jab against his nose, staggering him into the ropes behind. He actually had to glance back to see that, yes, they were suddenly pinned in by what looked like something from a competitive match but it vanished the instant it was done mattering. Like something out of a show, it pushed him back to the over eager rabbit heroine for a follow up hit.

Of course, he was no stranger to these powers; his own block was covered in matching gloves, deflecting the leather-bound blow before striking back. Cameras watching actually paused as he struck the bunny nice and firmly, giving the inspirational look of a sports poster. They kept moving, of course, but it was far too thematic for reality to allow the moment to pass.

“C’mon, I didn’t hear no bell!” Charlie laughed as he pulled out for a punch and-

Suddenly a hand grabbed his wrist and pulled him up close, tilting him back all the way. His eyes blinked as the lighting around them transfigured and even their outfit did; a tight suit for the boy and a dress on the bunny girl. Soft music pumped from the speakers instead of words and announcements that gave a slow, even tempo for them to move with. Their bodies twisted and turned as their steps became synchronized, quick or slow only when the music allowed it.

“Aww, havin’ fun yet?” Stormwave smiled cutely as she leaned in on a particularly low dip as they continued the sudden ballroom dance, her eyes glittering with the cartoonish powers.

“More than you think.” the cat giggled as he held the pose for a second, pulling her to his chest softly. Everything looked to be the romance of the century. The 17th century, that is. “I can’t wait to get you out of that suit.”

“Silly.” the rabbit whispered into his ear as they pulled up to standing. “I’m not wearing a suit if you’re not. Also.”

As the song shifted above them, Charlie took a moment to let her speak. Something important? Maybe he could get her to acknowledge the suit, take it off. After all, only one of them should be in these things. That was...

Why was he thinking of the suit, again? This was his skin!

“En garde.”

Charlie flinched as he saw the sword suddenly flash across the space between them with a brilliant flash, its light cutting the last droplets of water from his rubbery

form in twain. A little splatter hit him right across the eyes before trailing down and dripping off. The second slash left him stumbling away before his feline reflexes caught up with the pace of the battle. His mind swam as he struggled to catch up to the rules of their new duel.

"A sword?" the cat flicked his own rapier as it just formed out of the ether in his hands. A little bit of himself questioned how they were doing so much; he'd never been *this* powerful! Maybe it was because two of them were together? They might be amplifying, resonating. "A more elegant age, I suppose!"

Stormwave took a little bow as a hat appeared atop her head, adorned with the classical plume feather of the swashbuckler.

"Of course," she smiled a little more, the face turning totally manic. It was so hard to think of anything but being the best good hero she could be. "I'm a hero. We always win sword fights, right? Gonna slicey slash that silly suit right off of you!"

She still spoke incredibly quickly, faster than ever. Was she accelerating? She was acting like she was on ten thousand grams of pure caffeine. Not much control and very little impulse control. Charlie was getting concerned that she might actually be fast enough to cut his suit off! That sword was sharp as hell, he could guess. Would she really go for the collar? Remove the cat from the boy?

A little shudder of fear went through him. He wouldn't lose this freedom! It was his!

The duel was exactly what would be expected; overhead slash, soft block. Thrust thrust, parry and riposte. The movements were exaggerated yet fast, every attack faster than even the best normal duelists. Both of them were totally aware of the damage they were doing. When they sliced through a newspaper dispenser and sent shreds of paper through the air between them, they immediately speed up their fight for the purpose of cutting the outdated means of communication to confetti. Dramatic posing atop a chair before a goofy fall from the platform to the rails left them on even flooring at last.

"You are fun!" Charlie laughed once more before narrowing his eyes. That feeling from before hadn't left in the, what, minute they'd been trying to cut each other down? It was just a game and yet he felt it for once. "But it's time to take off the suit."

Threatened.

"Suit?" Stormwave tossed her sword aside and tapped her chin. She was actually thinking rather deeply but something about her mind wasn't wrapping on this costume concept. Why would she be in a suit? That's goofy. "Nah, I got a better idea!"

She giggled brightly before lifting up a finger to make a spark; the first display of her electrical powers since this battle started. The tiny little bit of lightning just clung between two rubbery fingers and lit up the area they were in like a lightbulb. Inconsistent, incandescent flashes cast long shadows throughout the entire area. It lacked the comedic appeal of the previous battles, ignored the subtle cues of how to be playful and fun. It was real, raw, powerful.

And she loved it.

"An idea?" Charlie flexed his claws. Something in his mind was giving him focus and clarity, something he'd lacked since becoming the Cat. He had to get that suit off

of her before it bonded entirely. It would be so hard to get her free if it was locked up as tightly as...

His?

"Oh yeah! Yeah! It's super awesome great! Bestest idea ever. C'mon, lemme show you." the rapid fire rabbit held up her fingers together as if to pinch the lightning itself. She moved about just a little bit while smiling so brightly, her eyebrows quirked like one of those generic movie posters. She had a plan, an idea.

Charlie flexed his claws into position in anticipation. This felt so different from before. Was she going for the win now? Instead of just changing the game?

"Ta-daa!" and she flicked both wrists to the side, suddenly snapping the lightning into flickering blades.

Sabers of crackling lightning reached out to lick the metal beams beneath them, leaving little streaks of cherry red where they struck. They both knew that they made enough heat to maybe melt even something that dense after a few moments, able to cut blast doors and bodies with equal ease. The shadows about them were chased away instantly, running from the pure power held in the utterly manic bunny's hands.

"Okay." Charlie felt unnaturally serious for a moment. This was a fight for more than just helping her; it was also stopping her from taking him down. He could feel the danger, the existential threat, to his endless freedom. It was finally someone who was naturally powerful released by a zipsuit. Was it really such a boost based on the original person? "Let's get that suit off of you."

An original person. Like him. Was he wearing...

"Suit? Nah. Just me! C'mon, shiny boy." one sword went up to her face, crackling and reflecting from her manic smile. Shadows and shine blended into the most sinister someone as happy as she could look. It didn't matter if she was a hero and would never really harm him that much; she looked threatening as hell. "Let's go."

The moment seemed to stretch into infinity as the duo stared one another down. Charlie's claws remained at the ready as the former human took a step towards him. His grin faded as he prepared for a real battle while hers grew all the more manic. The only sounds he could hear were the falling of rocks beneath her bunny feet and the thousand birds of her electrical swords. Every second carried more weight, more anxiety, as they prepared for what they knew would be the final move. They were as tightly wound as industrial springs, their tension so powerful that he feared it might snap and break the world itself. Like an old western movie, they were teetering on the edge of a final fight.

A tumbleweed manifested itself and bounced between them.

"Ya know." Stormwave suddenly interrupted the moment, smiling even brighter. She leaned forward just a bit, several feet away yet. "This place is sooo boring for a big hero showdown. I don't want to beat you up here."

"What are you saying...?"

"Geez, slow, huh?" she giggled once more. "What I'm *saying* is... you're late for the C-train."

Before Charlie could react, Stormwave suddenly jumped off the rails and up to the platform. There was just enough time for the cat to look at the bunny as she leaned in and waved at the boy, her eyes closed for a second before a rush of air and

metal suddenly struck the unprepared cat with more might than he could imagine. His toonish body wouldn't be injured, much, but this would hurt like hell.

He'd wake up, an hour later, on the other side of town. Hurt, annoyed, and more clear headed than he'd been in days.

"I see." the coat wearing cat looked down at Charlie before he awakened. "You managed to find a more annoying one than you. I suppose you might need some help... before I help you."