

Chapter 1

Exit Interview

“Hey everyone. It’s me, Erica.”

She flashed her cellphone camera a strained smile. “Oh my God. Whoo! I can’t believe that today is the day. I mean wow. Well, I promised to you guys last time that I would vlog a live feed just before go in to my final. So, here I am.”

She laughed and promptly shivered. “I’m so nervous. Look at me. I’m shaking.”

Erica held her hand before the camera to reveal her trembling hand.

“Anyways, I wanted to thank everyone for going on this journey with me the last several years. I can’t tell you how much it has meant to me. I never thought I would get to this day and wham we’re finally here. Wow! It’s just so much to take in.”

She fanned her face. “It’s so hot in here. I feel like I’m going to pass out or something.” She shook her head. “Here, let me just flip on the air conditioner.”

Erica reached down to switch her car’s ac to high. She sat up closed her eyes and exhaled slowly, trying visibly to compose herself. “Sorry. I’m rambling, I know. Like I said, I’m pretty nervous. I . . . I . . . I, how many times can I say ‘I’ in one minute.” She grimaced and held up her hand. “I’m so going to edit this in post-production.”

“Okay. As some of you who have been following my Vlog may already know, today is the day I have my exit interview. So, after years of training, it all comes down to this final interview. This one’s for the whole enchilada. If I pass this interview, I will finally get my Superhero License.”

Erica grabbed her head. “Ahhh! I mean, how cool is that!”

Her wide eyes stared off into space. “So, all I have to do is perform well during this interview, and I get to realize my greatest dream.” She chuckled. “No pressure, right?”

The phone in her hand beeped as a heart danced across the screen and text appeared below the image box.

It Read:

“You’re going to do great today. Your father and I love you very much and we believe in you.”

The heat rose up in her face. “Thanks Mom. I love you and Dad too.”

Two more hearts danced across the screen.

Erica turned suddenly. “Oh look!”

She spun in her driver seat trying to point her phone out her window, but accidentally banged it against the glass, knocking it out of her hand.

“Oops! Sorry!”

It fell to the base boards and she scrambled to pick it up. She pointed it out the window and the shaking camera caught the image of a girl wearing a backpack flying overhead. She zoomed up to series of metal and glass buildings lined with large trees. A moment later, she swooped down into a dive where she stuck a perfect three-point landing.

Off camera Erica said, “Wow! I wonder if she has final exam today too?”

She pointed her camera at a large brick sign posted in front of the majestic buildings.

Welcome to the Kirby Lee Sidekick Academy

Creating Tomorrow’s Heroes Today

Erica smiled at the camera. “That’s my Alma Mater.”

She rested her cell on her dashboard clip and glanced at her watch. “Well, I don’t think I can delay this any further. I guess it’s time to suit up.”

Erica reached into her backpack resting in her passenger seat and pulled out several articles of clothing including a purple WWI pilot’s cap. With some mild difficulty she pulled fastened an elaborate chrome belt with a holster around her waist, before pulling on a trench coat and pair gauntlet-like gloves. She pulled the cap on her head last fitting its goggles over her eyes.

She smiled at the camera nervously. “How do I look?”

The text blinked again with a heart floating above. “You look lovely.”

She blushed. “Thanks Mom.”

“Wish me luck,” she told her audience.

Whether they did or not Erica never saw as tapped the screen cutting off the feed with a *bleep*.

She tore her gaze from the now empty screen and exhaled a slow measured breath. Sweat gathered in the palms of her gloves. From her parking space, she glanced back up at the sign.

Her breath quickened as a flash of dread chomped down on her heart.

Taking another deep breath, she tore her attention away from it and focused back on her hands. “Okay, Erica. Okay. You can do this. You’ve been studying here for years. You’re at the top of your class for all your engineering and legal courses.”

She grimaced. “Granted you’re . . . less than stellar at your practical studies, but . . . no one can excel at everything, right?”

She flipped down her vanity mirror and briefly looked herself over. Erica would have referred to herself as cute, with a question mark. It was hard to feel attractive when many of your

classmates had the bodies of gods, both literal and figurative. She hoped the trench coat would hide the rolls of her “curvy” body. Another sigh escaped her. It wasn’t as if she could just plop down and do a bunch of crunches right now.

Or can I...

Erica shook her head. *No. I definitely can’t.*

She briefly wondered if she had time to throw up.

Erica sighed. “Let’s do this.” She slung her backpack over her shoulder and exited her car.

Her friend Jenny had passed her interview yesterday. Of course, Jenny, unlike her, had superpowers. Jenny could fly, fire energy beams out of her hands, and pick up a car. Unfortunately for Erica, not being a metahuman was a major strike against her in some people’s books. She’d heard rumors that the Dean, who was officiating for her today, was one of those people. She’d tried to push away the thought, but it wouldn’t budge.

Her phone beeped again.

She glanced down and smiled at the message.

I caught the tail end of your vlog today. Mom’s already ringing my phone off the hook. SMH

Don’t be nervous. You got this!

Thanks Ced. She typed back before pressing send.

Then grinning to herself she typed. *And it’s, “You’ve got this.”*

He sent her an emoji rolling its eyes.

YOU still got this.

Erica chuckled before she powered down her phone and stuffed into her backpack.

She glanced at the statue of the school's founder Kirby Lee Captain Starlight. It showed the him leaping in the air with his cape flowing behind him. The architects had design the fountain to flow down his cape's wake to simulate his flight. She paused a moment to touch the base of the statue, hoping some of the legendry's hero's power would rub off on her. The heavy concrete building of the testing center loomed before her. The statue didn't send any sudden surges of energy into her being, but the testing center did succeed at filling her chest with a sense of dread. Perhaps that sensation did grant her powers. She felt like she now had the power to throw up at will, so that was something.

Swallowing back a wave of bile, Erica proceeded forward. She pushed open the heavy metal door and headed towards the elevator. On the ride up her mind raced. *You can do this, Erica. You've got this. You've earned this! I mean how many other people have accomplished what you have? Graduate high school at eleven, and earn not one, but three PhDs by seventeen. Most people don't even have one PhD, and those that do take way longer to get it. You're a freaking prodigy! They should be glad to have you. Their lucky that you're so interested in being a superhero.*

Her smile faltered as the door pinged open. *But do they really care about what I've accomplished if I don't have powers?*

A fresh wave of nausea rocked her stomach, and she had to fight back her new found power. Her gaze darted around for another bathroom.

Calm down, Erica, she told herself. That can't be everything to they look at. You don't need to worry. You can do this.

As Erica walked down the hallway, her mood kept seesawing between stark terror and slippery reassurance. She passed other students uniquely killing time as they waited for their own tests. A girl lounged on the floor idly spinning a multi-ton boulder on her index finger while she studied her 'Intro to Inter-Dimensional Cultures' textbook. Nearby a skinny guy played an exciting game of hacky sack with seven of his clones.

She reached the classroom's closed door and knocked.

"Enter!" boomed a voice from inside the room.

Erica opened the door and paused just inside its frame. Inside, four of her professors and the Dean waited for her behind two tables. Dean Golden Gladiator sat in the center on a reinforced chair that supported his ten-foot-metallic frame. He didn't look up as he sharpened his immense sword.

On the Dean's left was Cyber Gauntlet, her professor of Advanced Scientific Theory and Application. He seemed oblivious of her arrival as he ran a diagnostic on his right arm with his other mechanical appendage.

Beside Cyber Gauntlet, was Madame Migraine, Professor of Psionic Defense and Telepathic Subterfuge. Her eyes glowed with an eerie light as she hovered in a lotus position, apparently meditating.

Directly on the Dean's right, the was hooded Shadowhunter, professor of Criminal Intimidation Tactics, Advanced Martial Arts, and Dining Etiquette, yawned.

Beside the cloaked professor floated Autumn Lightning, adjunct Professor of Gym. The young professor did not acknowledge her entry either as he texted on his cell phone.

The Dean looked up from his sword, and Erica felt as if the weight of his stare had a mass all its own.

She gulped.

“Candidate Erica Joy Belfry,” he boomed. “Are you ready to begin?”

Erica's mouth went dry. “I am,” she squeaked.

“Very well.” The Dean stabbed his sword down into one of the tables. “Have a seat, and let’s begin.”

He picked up a clipboard dwarfed by his massive hands, slipped on a pair of reading glasses inside his helmet and began to read. “This interview will be conducted to evaluate Kirby Lee Sidekick Academy candidate Erica Belfry, to determine if it is appropriate to grant her full superhero status. In accordance with our testing protocols the candidate must be evaluated by a panel of fully-licensed superheroes. The candidate’s past and present performances as well as her moral, mental, genetic, and physical capabilities are subject to scrutiny within this hearing. Does the candidate have any questions?”

Erica couldn't believe it. Today was the day she stood on the precipice of a whole new life.

Golden Gladiator looked up from his clipboard and addressed her with his penetrating stare. “Well?” he demanded.

“Um . . . no . . . Sir.”

Professor Cyber Gauntlet gave her an encouraging smile.

Dean Golden Gladiator scowled at her. “You assure us that you are indeed Sidekick Candidate Erica Joy Belfry, and not a clone, shapeshifter, robotic replica, magical construct, dimensional/temporal representative, or any other imposter not before mentioned.”

She stared at him. “I believe I am.”

“Correct.”

Erica met Madame Migraine's gaze. The professor of Telepathic Subterfuge gave her a disconcerting smile. Erica quickly looked away.

Golden Gladiator read on. "Ms. Belfry, the accuracy of your responses will be evaluated in real time by this panel's required telepath. Professor Madame Migraine will serve in this capacity for the duration of this interview."

"I, Dean Golden Gladiator, Order of Heroes 1984, will serve as the panel's administrator. Once the panel has made its decision, their judgment is final. Ms. Belfry, do you understand the terms of this interview?"

Erica nodded as her eyes flitted between the professors.

The Dean looked over his notes. "Very well. Let us begin. Ms. Belfry—"

Erica interrupted. "You can call me Erica, sir."

He looked up at her sharply.

"Or not. . ." she wilted.

"Ms. Belfry, what are your super powers?"

"Um . . . well. . . I can control my robots, and make them do whatever I want. I can also refit them pretty quickly for any task at hand." She smiled at them.

"I see." The Dean looked over his notes. "And these robots that you control, do you control them with some sort of technokinesis?"

Her smile faded. "Um, no."

"Do you control them via electromagnetic manipulation?"

She shook her head. "No, sir."

"Do you have a cybernetic implant that allows you to access you to access their internal processors, remotely?"

“No, sir.”

Golden Gladiator put down his notes and stared at her over his interlocked fingers. “Then how, pray tell, do you control these robots of yours?”

She held up the gauntlet on her left hand. “I made this gauntlet to interface with my robots from a distance.”

The Dean looked at her without blinking. “So, what you mean to tell us is, that you do not actually have any powers?”

Erica’s face warmed. “No, sir.”

Golden Gladiator made a notation on his clipboard with the tiny pen in his hand. “The candidate, Ms. Belfry, does not have any powers.”

Autumn Lightning looked at his notes for the first time. “Wait a minute! You’re telling me she doesn’t have powers?”

Erica’s eyes bulged. *Oh, no—I knew this would come up.* She caught her train of thought and tried to rear back on the brake. *Erica calm down—stay cool. No one has to know you’re panicking if you just keep your composure. Wait a minute. What about the telepath?*

She looked to the far end of the panel and her wide eyes caught Madame Migraine’s gaze. The Professor of Telepathic Subterfuge smirked at her and made a note on her clipboard.

Erica’s face went crimson.

Autumn Lightning, unaware of her mental plight, continued to rifle through his notes and read snippets aloud. “She performed below average on her hand-to-hand combatant course. She doesn’t have any particular weapon proficiency. Her accuracy was only above average on the range. Her overall athletic score is average, and not Sidekick-Academy-average, but standard-populace average.”

Autumn Lightning paused as he looked her up and down. “That makes sense. She’s a bit on the chunky side.”

Erica’s eyes bulged. Was he really fat-shaming her during her exit interview? She could feel her face heat again and she stared down at her hands, unsure of how to respond.

Her surprised wasn’t isolated. Golden Gladiator scowled at the younger professor, while Cyber Gauntlet was more vocal. “I beg your pardon.”

Madame Migraine made another note on her clipboard.

Oblivious to his peers’ reactions, Autumn Lightning continued reading. “She excels in mechanical, electrical, aeronautical, and robotic engineering.” He looked up at her, annoyed. “Oh, God, don’t tell me you’re another Gadgeteer. Is that your classification? Are you a Gadgeteer?”

Erica stared at him willing herself not to tremble. Her mouth went dry, but she refused to swallow. She answered him with a barely whispered, “Yes.”

“What?” His voice resounded in the room. “I can’t understand your mumbling. Are you a Gadgeteer or not?”

Cyber Gauntlet rose with a series of mechanical whirs and faced Autumn Lightning. “Do you have a problem with Gadgeteers?”

Autumn Lightning looked down at his robotic colleague from where he hovered. “Not especially. But let’s face facts, Gadgeteers are a dime a dozen. We have who-knows-how-many that pass through this school and don’t amount to anything special. Those who do make it are only cannon fodder.”

“Not everyone can skate through this pristine institution relying only on their innate powers,” countered Cyber Gauntlet.

Erica stared at Cyber Gauntlet. The warmth she felt for her Professor of Advanced Scientific Theory and Application melted the icy fear Autumn Lightning had stabbed her with.

Sparks of energy burst from Autumn Lightning's fingertip as he jabbed the cyborg professor's armored chest. "Do you have a problem with those with a meta-status?"

"Not at all. I have a problem with anyone who wears their ignorance like a cloak of pride," Cyber Gauntlet said.

Autumn Lightning snarled. "Listen if you want to step—"

"Enough!" boomed Golden Gladiator. "The panelists will act with decorum that befits their station. Is that understood? Now, sit down!"

Cyber Gauntlet and Autumn Lightning glared at each other as they did as they were told.

"Now, Ms. Belfry, however rudely it was addressed to you, Adjunct. . . Professor Autumn Lightning"—he turned his piercing stare on the young professor who had the good sense to look abashed— "asked you a question. What is your classification?"

"I'm a Gadgeteer, sir," she said weakly.

"And that is a fine classification." Professor Cyber Gauntlet smiled encouragingly. "After all, how many other seventeen-year-olds have earned three doctorates?"

Erica shook her head, offering him a small smile of her own. "None that I know of."

"That's not true," said Autumn Lightning. "There was that robot that came through last year. It was only three and it had over a dozen doctorates—and he could pick up a car."

Erica stared. *Again, with the car thing!*

"Yes, but it was preprogrammed with most of that knowledge," countered Cyber Gauntlet.

“And that clone of Einstein, Hawking, and a Gazelle. He had the best lay up on the basketball court. And that five-year-old telepath. Little dude was creepy, but he sure could play a hell of a game of dodge ball with his telekinesis.”

“We are here to interview Ms. Belfry,” snarled Cyber Gauntlet. “What do these other students have to with her evaluation?”

Autumn Lightning’s tone was pure acid. “My point is just because she’s smart doesn’t make her that special.”

Erica inhaled abruptly. There it was. No matter what she accomplished, it wouldn’t be enough to impress these people and make them accept her.

As Autumn Lightning’s words echoed in her head, silence stretched in the room, only punctuated by pens scratching paper. Professor Cyber Gauntlet tried to catch her eye, but she couldn’t bring herself to look at him.

“Ms. Belfry,” Shadowhunter said in a hushed voice that somehow filled the room.

“Could you please tell us your strengths?”

She gave the hooded professor a strained smile. “I guess I’d have to say my biggest strength is flying.”

“Noting that it has already been established you don’t have any innate powers,” said Shadowhunter, “how do you master the air?”

“I fly my aircraft. I built it myself.”

“Oh, brother.” Autumn Lightning sighed.

“Autumn Lightning, will you please refer to page eight of your dossier?” Shadowhunter snapped.

Autumn Lightning looked through his papers, grumbling to himself. Moments later his eyes widened. “A letter of recommendation from Skydive!”

He wasn’t the only who was surprised; Erica’s hands went to her mouth. “Professor Skydive, wrote a letter of recommendation for me?”

Shadowhunter nodded. “Your Professor of Aerial Maneuvers and Tactics wrote an exemplary letter for you. In truth, it’s not something the professor has done before for anyone else.”

“Really?”

“Yes, he stated you were a masterful aerialist. You should be proud.”

Erica beamed. "I am."

Golden Gladiator intruded on her momentary euphoria. “Let us proceed.”

Before anyone else could ask a question there was an enormous crash as a huge winged beast burst through the window. Erica screamed as the monster flew between the professors and herself. It had bullhorns protruding from its head and its skin was the color of wet blood. Holding a spear aloft, the creature snarled at the room.

The professors battle-hardened reflexes kicked as they rose to meet this enemy as one. Erica couldn’t believe her eyes. She had a front row seat to an actual superhero battle!

A huge grin spread across her face. *This is so awesome!*

Chapter 2

Teacher Disputes

Golden Gladiator yanked his sword out of the table and charged.

Madame Migraine waved her hand and the tables in front of them vaulted into the far wall, giving the teachers room. Cyber Gauntlet's armor hummed as multiple compartments opened around his frame and cannons, missile launchers and one buzzsaw popped out. Shadowhunter stepped back to make way for his more durable panelists. Autumn Lightning had a different plan.

"Finally, some action!" His body crackled with electricity as he flew at the winged creature, a bolt of energy lanced out of his outstretched hands. The demon flew above the attack. Erica screamed and ducked below the destructive beam that destroyed the back of her chair.

The monster dove at him and cracked the butt of its spear across Autumn Lightning's face. Lightning's field winked out as he crashed into the far wall and slumped to the floor.

Erica stared at his unconscious body, panting. *That creep almost killed me!*

The Dean's roar pulled her attention around in time to see him slash at the invader. The demon dodged the attack and lashed back with its spear. Sparks sprayed off Golden Gladiator's skin. The winged beast flew around the Dean and jabbed its staff into the small of the metal hero's back, sending Golden Gladiator staggering forward.

Cyber Gauntlet took aim, and Erica tried to scramble out of the way, but he saw how close she was close to his line of fire and lowered his weapon. Shadowhunter leapt past him to engage the demon head-on. The demon spun around to face him. The pair transformed into tornadic blur of motion as they fought with a violent series of martial arts. A loud smack erupted from the melee and the demon stumbled back.

The tables catapulted off the ground at the creature. It swung its spear around and shattered the first missile in half and batted the second table out the window. Erica threw her arms over her face as chunks of wood peppered her.

Its wings pumped furiously as it hurled itself at Madame Migraine. The Professor of Telepathic Subterfuge stared at the demon intently. It tumbled to the ground, grabbing its head.

Is she going to take that thing out? Erica wondered.

Madame Migraine sneered. “Your brute force means nothing to me, you insignificant—” The psychic’s eyes widened as it glared at her. “What are you doing?”

The demon hurled its spear at her. Madame Migraine screamed.

Cyber Gauntlet’s pincer arm blurred in front of the psychic as he snatched the weapon out of the air before it could skewer her. The robotic professor looked at their, his still-human eye wide. He stammered, “What do you think—”

The demon pounced on him grabbing its spear, it judo rolled the armored over its shoulder tossing him to the floor with a colossal crash.

It twisted around and a swift kick to Madame Migraine’s gut. She flew backwards gasping. Golden Gladiator and Shadowhunter closed in on it from opposite directions. It stepped on Cyber Gauntlet’s prone back and shot in the air through the gap of the charging heroes. In that space its eyes fell on Erica, and the latter gulped.

Uh oh.

The demon dove at her, spear first.

Erica did what any other Kirby Lee Sidekick Academy candidate would have done in her place: she fell backwards over her chair with a scream. Fortunately, she’d already drawn the ray gun she’d built for herself in her first semester. Unfortunately, she accidentally pulled the trigger

and the weapon discharged. Her oncoming foe ducked beneath the violent beam of energy, but Dean Golden Gladiator, who was just behind it, wasn't as lucky. The concussive blast struck the surprised giant square in the face.

The following moments will become legend for all who enter the Kirby Lee Sidekick Academy. It will be known as a Belfry Maneuver.

Golden Gladiator's sword slipped from his hand as he toppled with mighty crash straight through the floor. Shadowhunter, who was about to throw one of his famed sleep darts at the demon, caught the movement in his periphery just in time to catch pommel of Golden Gladiator's sword square in the face. He crumpled into an unconscious heap as his dart tumbled from his hand. The dart flitted end over end through the air, until it fell tip-first onto Cyber Gauntlet, who'd just hauled himself off the floor. If it had struck anywhere else, the dart would have harmlessly bounced off his armor; however, the tiny missile followed the same Murphy's Law as everything else and jabbed into Cyber Gauntlet's still-human-fleshed neck. The cybernetic professor's eyes rolled up into the back of his head as Shadowhunter's fast-acting sleep agent kicked in. He teetered and rolled back to the corner where Madame Migraine was still sucking wind from the earlier kick. She looked up with mounting horror. "No! You cybernetic simpleton don't—"

Crash! The half-ton armored professor collapsed onto her, snoring.

For a moment, both Erica and her adversary stared at the other end of the room. Then they both looked at each other to confirm that they had indeed just witnessed the same thing. It was in this moment that it hit her: she was alone against her very first supervillain.

Her adversary smiled.

