

Beauty Meets the Neo Brigade

Written by Stephen Egert

A Minor Cold (that leads to a colossal failure)

I had that feeling for the first time in my life. I was alone. I was the new girl in a city populated by thousands of people, and yet I had no one. Could I meet some new people? Make some new friends? That's all I could hope for.

I wasn't afraid of functioning on my own independently. It's just the feeling of having someone there for you who you could support too. Just the joy of having others in your life that doesn't make everything feel so empty. Just someone to share all the best in life with. That's what everyone wants in a friend.

But I was the new girl in a new city. I was starting with no one. Now, if you looked at me, and you think a sixteen-year-old blonde girl with superpowers, yes, you read that right, I have superpowers. If you think some girl who chose to leave her old life for a place where she could make a difference with her abilities for the better has it all and shouldn't feel bad about anything, well, you're wrong.

Sure. I liked having powers. Sure. I've dreamed of being a superhero. But every moment in my life when I was happy was when I had a friend by my side. And now, I had no one. It was all changing for me. Could I still feel good helping others as a hero without any friends? I don't know. I just never thought I'd have to ask that.

My best friend was unlike anyone else. He and I, we continued bonding through our friendship after we obtained similar superpowers. I had the ability to control my hair as a

weapon to grow and even form objects out of it, but we also shared the power of shapeshifting. But not just any kind of shapeshifting. The ability to transform into fictional characters. As a couple of nerds who spent so much time watching cartoons, reading comics, and playing video games together, it seemed like a dream come true right away. We would spend hours every day just playing with our abilities together like we were real characters on TV. We'd even fight each other for fun in our character forms just to amuse ourselves. I never wanted those days to end.

It all happened so fast. I had a friend. And then he was gone. All I had left of him was the book we created together. We called it the Character Manual. It was a reference guide of every character we knew we could morph into. Of course, it wasn't just a list of transformations to us. It was a tome of symbols of what drew us to each other. All the characters we would bond over, make up stories for, and eventually transform into. It was just for us. We would even write down all the character battles we did. Our memories documented for us to look back on.

That's all I could do at that moment. And as I flipped through the book, I went to the very back, which contained a photo of me and my best friend together. I needed a nice smile as I thought of all the fun we had. But that smile quickly deteriorated as my mind only took me to all that could have been. Ellie Bellavitz and Tyler Vitti. Superhero duo of Minor City. It was over.

You know, it's strange. Most of the really popular superheroes are known more for being solo than being in a team. All those solo titles you see in comic books. The ones that have the one hero's name printed on the cover. Everyone thinks of those instead of the team comics. So, if you're thinking, "Hey, Ellie, have you ever pictured your name above your head before starting your own story?", I'd just say no. I never understood why working alone would be what heroes want. All those vigilantes and anti-hero loners a lot of fans love. Is that really something they should all prefer? Well, not me. My goal was being in a team with a friend. But, again, that goal was over.

The more I thought about being alone, the closer a tear came to crawling down my face. I couldn't control that sadness. What was the point of living a life with no friends? Now, if you knew me, looking sad only gets worse with my powers.

As I continued feeling and looking glum, I walked near a little girl who was waiting for her mom at an ATM. I didn't give it much thought and continued walking with an obvious frown on my face when all of a sudden the girl looked at me and . . . BZZZZZZZZZ! I felt this unexpected surge of electricity enter my neck like I was being tortured in some abandoned military base. Feeling weak from this abrupt internal zapping through my body, I grabbed my neck and dropped to my knees. Let me explain.

I mentioned how I have control over my hair and can also transform into fictional characters, well, only female characters. But I have something else I'm not proud of. No, not my ability to alter my wardrobe into anything I want. That's just fine. Anyway, you know how some heroes and villains have unwanted side effects to their powers? Like, a girl with bird powers might be covered in feathers, and a guy with slime type abilities could just be a big goop monster? I have something that's not as externally terrible, but not great.

With my powers, if someone makes direct eye contact with me, and I'm not smiling or looking close to smiling, my body gets electrocuted, starting with my neck. It's like having some messed up behavioral shock collar for people with depression. This was a part of my powers I never thought I'd have to experience again. Believe me, I've always loved my abilities, but that was when I still had a friend, back when I assumed my natural good mood would never sour.

"Are you okay?" The girl innocently asked.

No. No I wasn't. My best friend was gone. I was all alone in a new city. And that shock was only a hint of how much I was sure to suffer on my own. There was nothing I could do, other than prolong this ordeal by doing all I could to avoid electrocution when another person looks directly at me. And that was to put on a smile.

“Me? Of course. I’m doing great. How are you?” I replied to the girl as I grinned, ceasing the shocks. It still hurt, so the smile was even harder to maintain, but I did it.

“You’re really pretty.” The girl complimented me. After hearing that as she smiled at me, my face lit up, that time, involuntarily.

“Awwwww. Thank you. You’re beautiful too.”

That was such a sweet moment. Not only did I meet my first nice person in Minor City, but it fueled a huge smile on my face as I gave the girl a quick hug. Of course, it wasn’t just that a cute little girl gave me a compliment that almost made me cry. It was that the smile gave me the strength to get up and continue going through the city. As someone who loves superheroes and has always wanted to be one, being forced to smile is not a welcome side effect to having superpowers. Or being a woman, for that matter.

If I was to survive with the powers I love, I was gonna have to keep my chin up and look like I was just fine with being alone. Because when you’re in a big city, you’re sure to run into some people. And I was supposed to look happy for everyone. This so would not have been a challenge if I had someone to support me. Just someone to talk to. But I hadn’t a single friend at that point, so surviving was going to be a lot harder than I anticipated.

I needed to stay positive. You’re gonna be a superhero, Ellie. If you help some people, they’ll like you, and you’ll have plenty to smile about, with or without any friends.

As I wondered if I could live out this dream on my own or if I should just give up, my focus shifted as I heard an explosion off in the distance. I had no clue what that was about. Was it an accident or something more serious? Acting on instinct, I ran towards it to check it out.

As I approached where I heard that detonation, I was again surprised to see what looked like a laser beam shoot out from an alley. I didn’t know what could’ve caused that, but I looked to my right at the alley to get a better look, and then, a second later, I looked to my left and found some kid just lying in the street. That

was odd. He wasn't there a moment ago. But there he was. He was about my age with dark curly hair, blue pants and a long sleeved pink shirt. And he was just sitting there relaxing as if no laser had shot by and as if lying on the street was perfectly normal in any city.

But then another kid emerged from the alley. Another kid my age with beige pants, an aqua shirt with a sweater vest, a bowtie, and big pair of glasses over a really angry expression. What was interesting was he had three marks on each hand: An ant, some grapes, and a pair of glasses. And, after I obtained my powers, I had three marks on my hands, though for me, it was a unicorn, a dragon, and a princess. This was probably a coincidence, but then the kid raised his bifocals above his head as his eyes glowed red.

"Got you now." The guy with the glasses declared as another beam was shot. This time, I could see it actually came from the eyes of that guy with the glasses. He had powers just like me!

"Hey! Look out!" I called to the kid lying down.

I may have been alone, but I wasn't sad enough that I was about to let someone get hurt. I was about to grow my hair out into the shape of a mirror that would form from hair to the real thing to reflect that attack in front of the curly haired boy. But before I could, , in a twentieth of a second, he got up and stepped out of the way before the heat beam was even a quarter of the distance from him. He then utilized that incredible speed to stop right in front of his attacker. The spectacle wearing kid fired another beam, but the fast one dodged it with ease and plowed right into his opponent who was forced back.

"Fourize, you really need to keep your eyes open a little more." The speedy kid remarked. Suddenly, that guy he was fighting shot another beam that went through his glasses this time. All the fast kid had to do was take a super-fast step to the left as the beam wound up hitting a street light, encasing it in ice like it had been flash frozen. "Okay, how many more shots do you want before I take you to jail?"

"If you stop moving and thinking you're so big, just one!" The fighter with the glasses affirmed, shooting one more beam, which the fast guy dodged again by moving his head to the side.

"Just give up, Fourize. You should know how awesome I am by now."

There wasn't a doubt anymore. I was watching an actual superhero and supervillain fight! And, what's more is as the hero kid was stopped, I got a look at his hands. He seemed to have a mountain, a first aid kit, and a cheetah tattooed on each of them. He had those marks and super speed. There was totally some connection, I thought.

But I wasn't thinking about that. I was just so thrilled seeing what I was watching. The super quick curly haired kid looked completely fearless. It was like he had done this his whole life. I've only had my powers for almost a year, but that guy was in total control. It was like villains to him were nothing. He just had this confidence I only wished I had when I was alone. At least, I assumed he was on his own.

While I was watching in this great hero in awe, he walked forward to apprehend his villain, when, suddenly, the normal street, sidewalk, and the rest of the ground, turned to ice. I saw the road ahead turn icy as it quickly froze the street going in my direction, and, before I knew it, the whole ground was completely frozen.

I didn't know what the ice was about, and neither did the hero as he found himself slipping and falling on his butt, losing control of things.

"Whoa! What did you do?" The speedster questioned his opponent.

"Oh, I wish I could take credit for this, Race. But hey, you're the awesome one. I'm sure you can figure it out." The glasses guy mocked his opponent as he stood up. He then pressed a button on his shoes, turning them into ice skates. "As for me, I'll just take these new shoes my pal, Cyhack, made and bid you a fond, see ya, sucker."

The villain known as Fourize used his fancy shoes to skate away with no problem.

“Hey! Stop!” The speedster barked, getting up.

The hero referred to as Race tried to use that impressive speed to chase his rival, but could only slip a second time. It’s just as hard to walk properly on ice, but running is a whole other story, obviously. And the kid making a getaway knew it, for he turned around and raised his glasses again, firing one more heat beam at the hero.

With no way of making a speedy defense, the beam hit the hero, knocking him down as he tried to get up, causing him to slide all the way near me as he lay injured on his back. The eye beam villain let out a laugh as he continued skating away.

Now, I know I could have gone after the guy myself, but it just didn’t occur to me then. I saw an actual super powered fight that didn’t involve me or my former best friend. It was like I was watching TV. But I guess this show was more interactive than I thought. But I didn’t realize that I could actually step in, even though I wanted to.

But, anyway, that moment was gone. And as that fast kid slid down to me, he looked up at me and found this blonde girl hanging her mouth open in awe, almost afraid to say anything. I was that girl.

“Okay. I know. I screwed up. You can move along now.” The speedy hero sighed to me.

“That . . . was . . . AWESOME!” I exclaimed like a fat comedic actor. Yeah. I know. Not “Are you okay?”. I could only think of how great it was to watch that action in front of me.

“Excuse me?” The runner uttered in confusion.

“That speed! That fight! That . . . coolness! You’re like a real superhero!”

“Uh, are you not from here?”

“Hey, Race!” A voice hollered from the distance.

So, I thought he was alone, but then another kid entered the scene. He had a blue shirt, dark green pants, and a gray beret on top of his squarish head, though he had some peculiar red

circular marks on his shirt and pants with a giant target on his chest. What was weird was, well, two things. One: His feet and ankles had rocket thrusters that propelled him into the air like they were mechanical. And two: when he landed and I got a good look at him, his shirt and pants didn't seem to have any gaps over his arms and legs. It was like his outer body was just those clothes. That was when I realized he wasn't a normal kid. He was completely robotic, just with a human skin. I was ten feet from a real cyborg! Not only that, but on his hands were marks of a brain, three black circles, and a graph.

"You take care of Fourize?" The rocket footed individual inquired the hero.

"No. He got away." The speedster answered, ashamed.

"Fourize beat you? That's impossible. His ocular heat vision only travels at a fifteenth of your average speed. How could he have hit you?"

"Well, Nator, if you . . ."

Suddenly, another individual appeared. This time, a girl engulfed in flames. She was completely covered in fire, though not the normal kind. It was all dark fire, creating darkness instead of light. She appeared in a puff of fire before her body was formed and the flames went out, revealing a girl with a purple shirt, blue pants, and what looked like a burn scar on the left side of her face. In addition, she had odd marks on her hands. For her, they were a punching bag, a flame, and a cat.

"Hey, Race, did you get Fourize out of our hair?" The physically fiery girl queried the one called Race.

"No, Pyra. He got away." Race repeated.

"Fourize . . . got away from YOU, Race. So, what? Does that make HIM our leader now?" The girl remarked with sarcasm and disbelief.

"He didn't outrun me. In case you haven't noticed, the sudden ice on the ground can slow a guy down."

"For you, maybe." The girl mumbled with her arms crossed, rolling her eyes.

"Yo, Race!" Another voice hollered from a distance.

Now, this was just getting cool. A third individual showed up. Another kid my age, with a flat top hairstyle, blue pants, and a green shirt. Though, his feet seemed to have taken the form of a snowboard that he used to ride his way over to us on the ice. He made that snowboard stop as he got some frost onto the fire girl before the board simply morphed back into the shape of regular feet. As he was close up, I got a look at his hands too. For him, I saw a pair of playing cards, a rubber band, and a motorcycle.

"I missed the action. Did Fourize get caught already?" The lanky fella presumed.

"No, Bendy. He got away." Race replied in frustration from the question. As he answered, an odd looking girl appeared to levitate down to the group.

This girl seemed to have some telekinetic powers as she floated down, but, unlike the rest of this group, didn't look as normal. She had long beautiful red hair, a pretty blue dress, looking like a princess, a jewel in a band over her head, and, here's the not normal part, cat ears, a tail, and blue skin. I didn't know if she was an alien, a mutant, a lab creation, or all of the above. All I knew was her hands ALSO contained marks, which, for her, was a sun, a book, and a light bulb. That, and she looked REALLY pretty.

"Race . . ." The blue-skinned girl began.

"HE GOT AWAY!" Race barked at the girl.

"I was just going to ask if you were okay." The girl clarified, speaking with a British accent.

"Oh . . . Sorry, Tel-E. Sorry." Race apologized, defensive.

"Well, forget Fourize. Does anyone know where all this ice came from?" The guy called Nator queried the group. After that, the girl with the scars projected dark fire from her hands to melt the ice, but the flames did not do the job.

"Huh. No good. It's like the earth is frozen from the inside or something." The fire girl noted, bewildered.

"Interesting. Race, do you have any idea what could've caused this?" The blue girl asked the team's leader.

"Okay, just let me think about this. Uh . . . uh . . ." Race said, somewhat anxious.

I'll skip what I felt here. You'll get the idea as I just tell you this team of five super powered teens were about to continue their thing when they suddenly looked at this new girl, me, just staring at them while I held my hands over my mouth like a giddy girl trying to contain her excitement over meeting her favorite celebrity.

"Uh, can we help you?" The girl who answered to the name "Pyra" inquired, unsure of what I was doing there, taking a few steps back. Instead of answering right away, I just stayed frozen and continued staring at them like an idiot. As I did, the tall guy with the flat hair showed off his powers by extended his neck out just a few inches from me. He had the power to stretch. Cool!

"I think she means you, girl." The stretcher informed me.

I took a few more seconds as I looked at all of them. It was like seeing action figures come to life that wasn't stop motion related. This was completely real. And it wasn't something limited to just me and my best friend. I found actual kids with powers just like me. I did encounter a villain earlier with my friend, but no heroes. This was big.

Having made it my mission to help others in this crime-ridden city, I introduced myself and explained to them as maturely and coherently as I could how I hope to stand for the forces of justice and aid in protecting the good people of . . . I'm just kidding.

"Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God! You! All of you! Five of you! An actual superhero team! You're . . . you're . . . you're . . ." I incoherently rambled.

"We're the Neo Brigade." Nator mentioned.

"Oh! You have a name too! Oh, I feel like I'm gonna explode! This is so cool!"

"Pff. Tourists." The fire girl mumbled to herself.

"I'm sorry, but . . . I have NEVER seen a real life superhero before."

"Well, that streak's finished. Let's go, guys." Pyra uttered, quick to move from me to the end of meeting me, getting ready to turn around with her friends.

“Yeah. We gotta get going.” Nator added.

These kids have obviously been a hero team for a while. So, clearly, if you were to look at the sudden freezing of this part of the city, they had some important business to take care of. I realized that meant they were going to leave to deal with this situation. But, after meeting these people who reminded me of myself and my friend, Tyler, I didn’t want them to go so soon. I had all this time of hanging out with another super powered teen that made me happy. I hoped I could make this moment last just a little longer.

Fortunately, I didn’t have to initiate anything to keep me from losing my excited smile.

“Wait. Hold on. Is that a Charevo Emblem on your hand?” The blue girl asked me before any of them could leave.

“A what?” I uttered, looking at the tattoo on my hands. She was referring to the mark of a unicorn, dragon, and princess. I was still curious what it meant.

“You know, the mark that represents the Behavior, Mentality, and Identification Elements of your Charevo Gene, which results in the super abilities you get.”

“Yeah right.” The cyborg muttered with his arms crossed.

“By the look of it, your elements are . . . Fiction, Imagination, and Femininity.” The British alien acknowledged, examining my hand. Elements? Charevo Emblem? I had no clue what she meant. I got my powers one day and became so eager to try them out. I never really thought about where they came from. I have vaguely heard of the Charevo Gene, some rare part of our DNA. But I didn’t know much. The alien girl seemed to, though. “Do you know what your powers are?”

“You guys wanna know about ME? Well, sure. Check this out.” I told them.

It was already cool enough that I had actual superpowers, but to actually show them off for actual superheroes was a whole other level of awesome. As if I had rehearsed it, I gave them a demonstration of growing my hair out, controlling it to go wherever I wanted.

But I wasn't stopping there. I grew it out to take the shape of a stone fountain resembling Race. It basically looked like a hedge sculpture, only yellow and made out of hair. But as it was still attached to the rest of my hair, I was able to use my ability to bring these artistic hair styles to life. As I set it down on the road, all the yellow instantly faded to a beige color, appearing more like a stone carving, for it was an actual fountain, complete with water spewing from his thumbs positioned upward just to prove how real it was.

The Neo Brigade sounded audibly impressed to see that I could make just about anything with my hair, and that continued as I extended my hair to the fountain, turning it back into hair before I retracted it all back to my head like the fountain was never there. After creating something for show, I displayed its practical use by growing my hair behind me into the form of a working jetpack. They weren't up close to see that it both looked real and acted real, so I took that to rocket myself up and fly in a circle like I was riding a rope swinging around a tree. It was fun, though I had actually done this before after playing with my powers back in Ohio.

Finally, I hovered in place over the Brigade with the jetpack before I decided to ditch it by growing my hair down, taking the device back into it. With nothing propelling me up, I began to fall like anyone without a jetpack would. But before I could get too close to the ground, I utilized my character morphing power to transform into a superhero character I grew up watching.

As I plummeted, my body glowed white as it altered in its form to resemble a character called Major Lee, a woman with shorter blonde hair and a blue and red jumpsuit who could fly. And as I can copy both a character's appearance and abilities I saved myself by flying right over the Neo Brigade while creating a small light show with Major Lee's hand energy directed at the sky. That energy wound up exploding in the air, creating an array of fireworks. The Brigade gazed at the small light show as I descended back down before glowing all white again, this time, morphing into various other characters. To conclude my big finale,

when I landed, I transformed back into regular Ellie Bellavitz and held my arms out like a circus performer with a big smile.

I should acknowledge how my performance may have seemed a little too close to a lengthy anime magical girl transformation that included samples of her abilities to introduce her to new viewers. That being said, I was just trying to pull out as much as I had in my wheelhouse while keeping it in a condensed fashion. A bit sloppy, but I think it did the job.

“Wow. Impressive.” The alien girl complimented me and my powers.

“You’re telling me. Guys, we gotta let her join the team.” Race suggested as I squealed with giddiness at the idea.

I was hoping I’d get these guys to like me, but this was a whole other ballgame. I mean, they’re superheroes, so it seemed safe to assume that my powers would catch their interest. Had I known I was putting on an audition piece for joining their team, I have no idea if I would’ve made it through the whole thing. Well, surprise!

“Whoa whoa. Back up. We’re not letting some blonde in the Brigade just because she has a slew of power.” The fire girl objected.

“Hey, yeah. What if she’s got some other powers that could collapse on us when we need her to do something useful?” Bendy suggested.

“Don’t be ridiculous. She wouldn’t have something that could hinder her or any of us.” Race optimistically claimed before turning back to me. “You don’t have anything else in you like that, do you? You don’t. Right?”

It all seemed so exciting up until that moment. I didn’t know how to answer this question. I knew the answer, but should I tell them the answer? The hair power and character transformations sold them to make me join their team, but how would they feel if they knew my powers forced me to smile when someone looks at me or I’d get electrocuted?

I saw this as a nice opportunity to make some cool new friends and actually be in a hero team like I planned. It didn’t work

out the first time, but could it work with these guys? If I joined, this would be the perfect chance to fulfill my goal to help others, but also not be alone. So much was on my mind about what it would be like for me if they knew that side effect I carried. But I made my choice for what to tell them.

“Uh . . . nope. Nothing but what I showed you.” I innocently lied.

“See? She’s cool. She wouldn’t be a problem at all.” Race assured his group.

“You don’t know that.” Pyra argued.

“She’s right, Race. We don’t even know what kind of experience she’s had.” Nator added.

“Well, actually, I did just beat a villain called the Gamer about an hour ago.” I mentioned.

“You . . . beat the Gamer. You.” The cyborg incredulously said. “Now, that’s impossible. No one can escape her tricks.”

“Yeah, she’s lying. Let’s go, Neo.” The fire girl told the team as she prepared to leave.

“She’s not lying.” The alien informed the team leader. “I’ve analyzed her thoughts, and she really did defeat the Gamer.”

“You’re a mind reader? Whoa!” I cried as I then spelled the word “Awesome” with my hair.

I wasn’t gonna brag much that I actually did have a run-in with an actual supervillain when I first got to Minor City, but I’m glad they could learn. However, as interested as I was in seeing each new power from these guys, I grew concerned that Tel-E, the blue girl, would use that telepathy on me again. Like, to learn about that frown shocking part of my powers that could potentially backfire on the team.

I had to keep that hidden, though. No matter what. The less they knew, the better. So I continued playing it cool, hiding all my concerns to not make the inquisitive girl curious to read my mind further. I just kept my endearing smile the whole time even as the butterflies in my stomach started flying faster. I just had to act like I had nothing to hide, and I’d be good.

“So . . . am I in?” I asked.

"Absolutely!" Race eagerly responded. "Come on, guys. Whaddaya say? Nator?"

"Race, we just met this girl. You don't just invite someone like that to work with you just because she has some skill. Haven't you ever heard of background checks following a job interview? It doesn't make sense." The robotic Nator argued against me.

"Yeah, but she can really help us out. Bendy?"

"Hey, man, she looks powerful, but there's no way she'd last with us. I mean, unfamiliar power can lead to danger, which can only mean someone can get hurt. On the other hand, getting hurt is my thing, so I can go either way on this." The rubber skinned fella answered.

"Okay. Pyra?"

"No. We don't need someone like her with us." The fiery Pyra stated with cynicism.

"Tel-E?"

"Well, I do agree with Nator that it may be early for having her join us. But if you believe this is right, Race, I'll support your decision." The alien known as Tel-E told the team leader.

"Alright. That's good enough. The girl's in." Race concluded as I jumped for joy at this opportunity. However, I could hear some grumbling from that team once he said that. "Look, let's just give her a try, and if she's no good, she's gone. Sound good?"

The team mumbled to themselves, sounding a little more okay with this proposal, which was as I good as I could hope for. Long story short, they were letting me in. This was gonna be great, I thought! No more feeling miserable.

But while I was ready to befriend new people, it was clear some of these guys weren't crazy about me being brought on. I didn't know if I should be too worried on account of the leader gave me his full support, but I just started thinking. Race maybe seemed a little too interested in me. I mean, not even five minutes of seeing me and he invites me onto his team. I didn't even have to ask for this. I'm not complaining, but that seemed like a bold move for someone in charge.

So Race liked me and the other four had varying degrees of being less supportive. But I didn't care. All I really wanted was to make friends. And as long as I was being forced to smile, that could probably pay off, I thought. Nobody could argue I didn't come across as nice.

"Alright, I guess we've been told you're with us now. Come on. We'll show you the team HQ." Nator reluctantly told me.

Just then, the team showed off their abilities one more time as Nator used his robotic rocket feet to launch himself into the air as Pyra ignited herself in a blaze of darkness to fly alongside him. After that, Tel-E gracefully levitated herself to join them about fifteen feet up while Bendy stayed on the ground, stretching his feet to the size of a snowboard again, riding the ice down in the direction they flew.

I wasn't going to get lost in seeing their powers again, for they were inviting me to go with them. So I transformed into a half-woman half-bird character, Hawkette, and immediately flapped her wings to ascend myself up to travel with what would hopefully be my new friends.

I was beginning to follow them when I looked back at Race who, I guess would normally run with them, but predictably slipped on the ice again, about to fall behind.

"Wait! Guys? Little help?" Race called to the group as Tel-E then levitated him up with her.

With all of us together, the Neo Brigade brought me about half a mile down to their base of operations. It was a two-story building located right next to the city police station. Fortunately for Race, there wasn't any ice surrounding the building. It was pretty cool to be in a real hero HQ, though slightly underwhelming as the inside didn't look as flashy as I pictured it being. Though, to be fair, neither did the outside. Not exactly a huge fortress looking like their team logo or anything.

When I got inside, there was a large open area with a lounge area at the end by another door that included a kitchen on one side with some sofas and a TV on the other. A couple tables with chairs were in the open area for if they had some business to

discuss, I guess. Again, not what I expected, though the lack of campy superhero costumes from the hero team did sort of hint at it. I was planning to be a superhero and even I was just in my normal attire of a green sweatshirt and a long purple skirt. The only one who looked the most different was the alien girl, Tel-E. And she was the one who gave me a tour of the building.

She brought me to the second floor, which contained all the bedrooms and a few other rooms. She led me down a hall to see everything, though I remained nervous the whole time that she would discover the part of my powers I was hiding.

"This corridor contains all of our rooms. We have one more down at the end you can take." Tel-E informed me.

"Thanks. I'm Ellie, by the way. Ellie Bellavitz." I said, formally introducing myself as we shook hands.

"I'm Tel-E Vega from the planet Knowlglia. I could tell from your thoughts that you're quite perplexed by the blue skin and tail."

"Oh . . . well, I don't see that many aliens, you know." I sheepishly admitted, trying to keep my mind off my powers as she had already been digging around mentally.

"I understand. It is your first time in this city."

She may have taken a peek inside my head, but Tel-E seemed awfully friendly. Not a bad start meeting these guys, I thought.

"I must say, you look quite upbeat given how new you are to this team. One would expect a bit more anxiety given the circumstance." Tel-E acknowledged, taking note of my continuous smile.

"Oh. Well . . . I guess I just don't get nervous very often." I lied as Tel-E gave me a cute grin.

"By the way, I know this won't lead to you supporting your claim, but I know your secret."

I won't lie. I was both shocked and not shocked hearing that. There wasn't much surprise given that she was a telepath and was bound to find out. But so soon? All I could think was

“That couldn’t be it for me? My time in the Neo Brigade was coming to an end before it came to a start?”

Thinking of what was sure to occur with this information out, my face melted into a state of worry. And my secret was about to kick in for some confirmation.

“You what? Aaaaaaah!” I muttered before screaming in pain upon the sudden shock I felt surging through my neck. Just as I did before, I dropped to my knees, feeling weak.

“Oh! Sorry! I’m so sorry! I suppose I should have anticipated this result as well as your reaction.” Tel-E apologized as I kept my head down to end the electrocution.

As long as the person can’t see me not smiling by looking at the front of my face, I wouldn’t get hurt. That’s how it worked. I could only give her the top of my head to ward off the frown torture. After a few seconds of that, I eventually forced a slightly happier face to look up at the Knowlgian detective.

“Uh . . . so . . . you know.” I reiterated for myself.

“Yes. I’m sorry. I just heard you thinking of how you were hoping I wouldn’t pick up on that blemish in your abilities. I thought I should clear it with you, but perhaps that wasn’t ideal.” Tel-E explained.

“So . . . I guess that’s it for me then.” I assumed, which felt pretty embarrassing by the fact that I was smiling through this realization.

“Fear not. I won’t tell anyone about this.”

“Really? Oh, thank you!” I shouted, this time putting on a sincere smile. “But why?”

“I just think the secret makes sense.”

Now that was a lucky break. No one but Tel-E had to know about this. I was curious as to what made sense about keeping something pretty damaging from the rest of the Brigade, but I decided not to press on about it in case Tel-E were to change her mind.

“Just one thing, though. I know you and those you’ve been with haven’t experienced much danger in your home. But it happens frequently in Minor City. So if the evil of this city doesn’t

hurt you first, taking it seriously enough that you fail to smile will.” Tel-E cautioned me. “I won’t tell anyone about this possibility, but are you sure you wish to remain here knowing the potential peril that lies ahead?”

I never thought about that. Me and my friend, Tyler, we were just a couple of kids from a crime-free town in Ohio who got superpowers and only used them for fake battles with each other for fun. Tel-E and the Neo Brigade had actual crime to deal with. If something serious happens, my smile could vanish. This made it all the more worrisome of what being a superhero means. It wasn’t like seeing it on TV where no one really gets hurt. I didn’t know if I could do it, but I was never one to not try.

“I won’t lie. That will be a challenge. But I promised myself, and . . . someone else, that I’d screw around with my abilities less and actually put them to good use. And I think working with you guys is the best thing I could do. So, yeah, there’s a risk with that unwelcome power, but if I have to put on a grin to get through it, I’m willing to take it.”

“Well, I certainly admire your optimism. Best of luck then.” Tel-E concluded, smiling back at me.

The red-headed alien girl certainly seemed nice enough, and most definitely was someone who wanted me to do well. But then I came across the other girl in the team who . . . well, added some diversity to my welcoming to the group. It was Pyra, the fire girl, who I ran into in the hall, being much closer to her than I was earlier outside.

“Well, since Race says you’re gonna be hanging out with us, he says you get a room here. Also, Race says I have to introduce myself, so my real name’s Bonnie Moto, but everyone calls me Pyra.” Pyra mumbled, not pleased to see me for some reason.

“Oh . . . uh . . . thank you. I’m . . . I’m Ellie.” I introduced myself, not making much eye contact as I saw her face up close.

“What?”

“Huh?”

"I'm not on the floor. My face is up here." Pyra reminded me, not happy with how I wasn't looking at her. "What? You have a problem with the scars? They don't make my skin look perfect like yours?"

"Uh, what scars?" I stupidly asked, trying to change the subject.

"Yeah, I'm sure that's just what you thought." Pyra muttered as she then ignited her body in her dark fire before disappearing into the air like a match that went out.

So I guess that could have gone better. I won't talk much about the other two guys on the team, Bendy and Nator. They were slightly friendlier than Pyra, and I ran into them on the first floor when Race had me wait on the couch in that lounge. I saw them come out of the door in that area, which seemed to lead to the police station next door.

I asked them if I could see where they came from, but Bendy only stretched his body out in front of the door, telling me it's for official Neo Brigade members only. That seemed like a simple fact I could accept, but Bendy seemed to laugh at me how I wasn't really a member of the team.

Nator didn't mock me for this, but he was a bit more assertive in the rule. He didn't seem to consider me as being part of the group any more than Pyra. They were willing to go along with trying me out to see if I don't explode on them, but they weren't there yet.

The only one who chose to acknowledge me as a member of the team was their leader, Race, who later joined me in the lounge, holding a packet of paper, after coming out the door Bendy blocked me from.

"So, Ellie, how you likin' this place?" The team leader inquired.

"Oh, don't get me wrong. It's awesome. But I don't think everyone is too thrilled with me being here." I admitted.

"Hey, don't worry. They're just skeptical of you in action. I'm sure you'll win them over soon. Then they'll want you to stay."

"Yeah, I uh . . . I hope so."

“Trust me. With what you can do, we don’t need hope.”

Okay. Now he was just creating a lot more pressure for me to keep my secret and also do a good job. I know he was oblivious to this glaring weakness of mine, but just why was he so full of this confidence in me? It’s one thing to hear about what I’ve done, but he hadn’t actually seen me in action yet. Was he always this upbeat? If so, I didn’t wanna ruin it for him by telling him *everything* about my powers.

“Well, I won’t push my luck. But I’ll do my best.” I vowed, trying not to get him too excited. “I mean, it’s been my dream to be a superhero since I was a little kid. And just look at you. You’ve probably got so much experience, nothing ever makes you nervous.”

“Yeah, well . . .” Race muttered with modesty.

“So, anyway, when’s our first big team battle? Do you guys have, like, sparring matches between each other? How did you get to live in this place? How did you ever get to run this team?” I questioned Race, getting ahead of myself.

“Yeah, Ellie, uh, there’s something you should know first.”

Before we could talk, an older gentleman emerged from the door Race came out of with a stern look on his face. He was dressed in a blue uniform with a tie, glasses, a badge, and a hat that said MCPD on it.

“Okay, Neo Brigade! Time for inspection! Everyone report! No loafing around now! Your Chief of police is here!” The man nasally yelled like an old Navy captain as he approached the room me and Race were in before lightening up as he saw Race. “Ah, Ace, how are you, my boy? Everything going well? You leading your team nicely? Keeping everyone out of trouble? Yes?”

“Uh, yes, Chief.” Race answered.

“And I believe you confronted Fourize earlier. Does your team have their damage reports filled out?”

“I have it here. And it was just me who fought him.” Race informed the Chief, handing him the papers he had. “There were just a few pieces of the sidewalk destroyed from Fourize’s heat beams with a street light frozen.”

Damage report? I didn't hear anything about this.

"You have to fill out a report for the police chief?" I whispered.

"We all do. We basically have to summarize any damage each person caused or person who got hurt either from one of us or the enemy. There's a whole bunch of other stuff like that, which we normally fill out in the team office in the police station next door." Race explained as he pointed to that hall he came out of earlier.

"Huh. Superheroes working in an office for the city outside of fighting. It's odd and makes sense at the same time."

I guess that door led to an office in the police station for the team, which is where they did that work. That's another aspect of being a superhero I never pictured: Working with the government. I guess that's the mundane part of superhero life that you don't see in superhero stories because it seems like only an idiot would write boring stuff like that for them. But this was real life. And everything was included.

"So Fourize eluded you, but all in all, minimal damage? Yes?" The Chief inquired for confirmation.

"Yes, Chief." Race replied.

"That's a good boy." The man happily uttered, putting his hand on Race's shoulder. After that, he went back to his cranky and impatient mood as he shouted to the whole Neo Brigade. "Okay, everyone get down here! Don't make me turn the alarms on!"

Suddenly, Bendy stretched himself from upstairs to the Chief with only the upper half of his body down.

"What up, Chief?" Bendy casually said, startling the Chief who backed away as Pyra then appeared in front of him, surprising the man again before Tel-E and Nator came in.

"I should point out our team's boss is the Minor City Police Chief, Lou Trotterberg. He kinda let us form the team." Race mentioned.

"Alright, everyone, line up for roll call!" The Chief hollered to the group.

“Chief, we're all here.” Nator acknowledged.

“I said line up!”

So these guys had a boss. Boy, was I learning about these guys or what? Anyway, following his order, the Neo Brigade lined up in front of him. I didn't know what to do, but I decided to get in line too right next to Race. There were only six of us, but the Chief was reading everyone's name off a clipboard before looking up at the line after each name.

“Okay, let's see. Nator? Good. Tel-E? She's here. Okay. Bendy? Good. Uh, Pyra? Here. Race? That's you. Okay, you're all present. Very good . . . Wait a minute. One, two, three, four, five, six . . .” The Chief mumbled to himself during roll call before becoming outraged as I caught his eye. “What? Who is this!? Who brought an unauthorized guest into this headquarters?”

As if they were all saying, “This was not my idea”, everyone but Race casually took one long step back, looking like Race stepped forward. As Race and I were up front, Bendy then gratuitously stretched his arm out and pushed Race forward an extra few feet.

“Uh, heh . . . Chief, this is Ellie. She's here to help us out for a little while.” Race meekly introduced me as I gave the Chief a smile, waving my hand over my chest.

“Yes, uh, Ellie Bellavitz. Nice to meet you, sir.” I added, holding my hand out, expecting a handshake but receiving a cold glare instead.

“What are you smiling at, girl? You think everything going on today is something fun to you?” The Chief interrogated me, looking into my eyes about a foot from my face.

I instantly thought of all those military officers in TV and movies who don't like their soldiers smiling in attention. With that in mind as he shouted at me, I was about to get rid of my smile, but, instead, kept it up.

“Oh, well . . . I guess I hadn't noticed as much.” I claimed.

“What is she doing here? I don't need assistance from some guest full of optimism like the alien here.” The Chief

affirmed with authority, looking at the team as he then gestured to Tel-E.

“Hmph. That makes five of us.” Pyra commented.

“No. Wait. She can actually help us out. See? A Charevo Emblem. Huh? Huh?” Race argued before holding my hand up to reveal the marks on my hands like a desperate salesman. Apparently, those marks *were* a part of my powers, which the Brigade leader must have been implying.

“I don't care what she has. I need you to focus less on your female socializing and more on the Intel I've received. It seems Cold Miner and his gang have escaped from prison and are supposedly concocting some scheme to do something to the ground.” The Chief explained, looking at a sheet of paper.

“Uh, you mean freezing it?” Nator suggested, pointing to the ice outside.

Remember how I saw that ice make its way to Race and that villain, Fourize, he was fighting. Well, as I looked outside, I found that it hadn't stopped. The ice expanded all the way to the HQ and police station, surrounding them completely.

“Whoa! It's getting stronger. Cool! Uh, I mean, does this happen in your city a lot?” I asked, hiding the enthusiasm.

“Unfortunately, our town has a history of being besieged by those who wield the Charevo Gene.” Tel-E informed me.

“Geez. It looks like the ice has already covered about half the city at this point.” Nator acknowledged, looking at the town.

“This is an outrage. I can't drive home with the roads like this. Pyra! Melt the ice so I can get out of here!” The Chief ordered.

“Yeah. Here's the thing. It's not that easy.” Pyra informed him with a bit of attitude.

“I said melt it! That's an order!”

“Hey, Race seems to think Ellie's powers are good enough to have her here. Why not make her do it?”

Taking her sarcastic recommendation seriously, the Chief ordered me to melt the mysterious ice. Not looking to argue with anyone, I gave him a smile and extended my hair out the window.

With it in place, I grew the end of it into the form of a flamethrower that turned real, which I used to exude as much fire as I could to try and melt everything. But, like Pyra discovered earlier, it had no effect. On the plus side, I got to show the Neo Brigade's boss my powers.

As I took my hair back, the team's television had the news on, which quickly cut to a new transmission of a big guy with stubble, suspenders, and a yellow miner's hat on.

"Hello, Minor City." The guy greeted his viewers.

"Cold Miner!" Race exclaimed.

"I just thought I'd inform you all that no one will be driving home safely today."

"What!? Now see here, you!" The Chief barked at the TV.

". . . If you wanna go somewhere, you're all gonna have to walk just like my family has had to. Since we've had to work non-stop in endless heat, I've had to watch everyone live in luxury with their fans and air conditioning. I've had to live with constant heat, so Minor City lives in the cold." The villain known as Cold Miner ranted to the city.

So this guy was responsible for the freezing city. He boasted a lot, but then he levitated a pickaxe to him as I caught a glimpse of his hands, which had the marks of a staff, a cooler, and a miner's hat. He then swung his axe into the ground as we looked out and saw even more ice form throughout Minor City.

This guy looked serious. But, in a way, kind of fun to me. I mean, just to me. Being someone who's read so many comics with ice related supervillains with bad names that had those kind of puns, this was literally a villain I'd see on TV. This was sure to be my first big villain to fight, and I was up for it. And this Cold Miner guy was up for anything as he had taken his turn at engulfing the city in ice once again.

"Enjoy the inconvenience, folks. Though, I do encourage you to try driving in my ice. You know, anything you can do to evacuate while my Chill-dren have their fun." Cold Miner laughed as his message cut off.

“Cold Miner wasn't kidding about his men, guys. Look!” Tel-E alerted us, looking out the window.

As we all looked outside again, I noticed some men and women wearing masks and blue coats driving snow mobiles. They seemed like they were just getting around the problem with the frozen roads, but they were also carrying pistols, which they shot at several buildings. As they used these weapons, a blue beam emerged from them, which wound up freezing the buildings, encasing them in ice, not dissimilar to the beam that Fourize fella used with his glasses on that streetlight from before.

There wasn't any guessing at this point, those guys were Cold Miner's own crew of minions.

“What? They got the new Snow Speeders? No fair!” Bendy complained.

“Let's go, Neo!” Race announced.

The Neo Brigade started heading out the building.

“Time to show everyone what you're made of, newbie.” Race told me as we headed out.

“We're actually going into team action? Awesome!” I cried with high anticipation, running out with Race.

“Wait! One of you still needs to help me with my car!” The Chief called to the team as we all left.

This was gonna be a real thrill. Finally, I was about to fight alongside a superhero team. Everything positive was sure to take place if the first one goes well. That's how it works with job performance. You only get one first impression. And I had to make this count.

As we followed those minions, who went by the group name, “The Chill-dren”, heh. Weird name. Anyway, as we followed them, we saw those cronies enter a bank. Sure enough, they were taking advantage of the lack of transportation the police had to stop them and chose to get as much of a crime spree going as they could.

When we made it to the bank, we busted through the doors, ready for action.

“Tell your boss he's still uncool!” Race announced to the Chill-dren.

“Really. That's what you're going with.” Pyra criticized Race's line.

A Chill-dren drone quickly shot her ice pistol at the team. Looking to impress my new colleagues, I transformed into a character called Mia the Mage. What better way to show off what I can do than bringing magic into the game. And that's what I did, for as the beam came towards us, I used Mia's power to conjure up a portal in front of the beam as it went inside. I then opened a second portal, which the beam came out of, going in the opposite direction, freezing a minion in the process.

“Go Neo!” Race cries, pointing forward.

On that order, the Neo Brigade rushed forward as the Chill-dren fired at the floor with their ice pistols, freezing it before they all managed to run with their cleats. Race tried running, but slipped, making his powers completely ineffective once again.

“Oh, this is not my day.” Race mentioned as he became a sitting duck for several Chill-dren who pointed their ice pistols at him.

Race was about to get frozen, but Tel-E came in and levitated the Chill-dren's weapons away. As they were defenseless, Bendy then slid forward with his feet forming a sled while he stretched his arms out into the shape of two large shovels, knocking all of them down.

Meanwhile, Nator punched a minion away before demonstrating what his cybernetic body could do. From one of those red marks on his arm, it turned out to be a hatch that opened with a metal claw emerging. Nator aimed that claw at a Chill-dren enemy and fired it out as it extended on a cable before grabbing hold of him. The cyborg then sent a surge of electricity down that cable to the claw, shocking the minion who collapsed to the floor.

At that time, I fired some magical energy at the underlings while Pyra flew her ignited self down to shoot a wave of fire at a crew of them before Bendy swatted them all away with his

extendable shovel arms. Needless to say, things were going well, and looking fun.

Optional Dialogue 1

In the midst of all this, I flew into one minion, knocking him down as I noticed one more was about to fire at Pyra and Bendy from behind.

“Heads up!” I hollered, jumping in front of Pyra, morphing back to normal.

Thinking quickly, I grew part of my hair into a big water cannon, which I shot at the minion while he fired his gun. His shot wound up mixing with the water, creating a big icicle from not only freezing the water, but freezing him as well once he got drenched.

“Whoa! Nice one.” Bendy complimented me as I grew my hair out to smack some more enemies around.

While we were taking care of things, I saw Race not making much of a contribution. There was one Chill-dren crony only a few yards from him that didn’t see the Brigade leader. The speedster tried to charge at him, but he could only slip and fall on his back as his momentum caused him to slide right into a wall. At that point, the crony did see him and saw an easy target.

However, before I could let him act on that, I grew my hair out to swing it into his legs, knocking him down. I then moved my hair all around him to tie him up before forming chains out of it, keeping him down.

“Oh man. Thanks, Ellie. That was close.” Race said in relief as Bendy slid over to him.

“Race, if you wanna get in on the action, you can always let Bellavitz use you to hit someone.” Bendy laughed.

Tel-E and Nator finally displayed even more of what they could do. For the alien girl, she stopped one minion by creating some blue energy over her forehead. Suddenly, an energy beam was projected from it, going right at the minion. She had some weaponized mind energy to go with that telekinesis. Nice!

Nator then demonstrated some more of what he packed into that body of his by opening another port, this time, the one on his chest that looked like a giant target. He then revealed a gun that fired more rounds of energy like Tel-E did, hitting several Chill-dren drones.

With all this done, these guys looked like they had enough, so to top it all off, I quickly extended my hair around them, pulling the Chill-dren together into a tight grouping as they were piled on top of each other. With all of them in place, I finished it by growing my hair over them further, going from the floor to right near the ceiling before altering my hair that surrounded them into a big tube with all of them sealed inside. They were all taken care of and weren't going anywhere. In summary, we beat 'em good.

"Wow! My first henchmen take-down! Pyra! Get a shot of me with these guys!" I told the fire girl, extending my hair to her and forming a camera in her hands. I proceeded to pose in front of the Chill-dren, but Pyra just tossed the camera and rolled her eyes.

"Okay. We stopped them here, but . . ." Race began, trying to keep his balance on the frozen floor.

"We? Just how did you evaluate your contribution, Mr. Lack-of-Traction?" Nator remarked.

"Alright. You guys took care of them here, but Cold Miner is still out there."

"Oh! Are we gonna storm a supervillain's hideout?" I eagerly asked.

"Uh, well, that's kind of a problem. None of us know where that is."

"So we have to find Cold Miner's place? And that will be done how exactly? I mean, it's not like he leaves a trail wherever he goes." Nator acknowledged.

"Hey, why don't we try following some o' them Chill-dren to their hideout? I mean, they gotta go home some time." Bendy suggested.

"Hello? We can just interrogate his crew right here. Race, you agree with me, right?" Pyra argued.

"Uh . . . uh . . ." Race stammered, sweating a little as we all looked to him.

"I'll tell you how we should catch Cold Miner. We gotta draw him out somehow, like making him think we captured his wife again." Nator noted. "What do you think, Race?"

"Well . . . uh . . ."

"Go on, Race. What do you think we should do?" Tel-E asked the team leader. However, when I asked her why she couldn't just read his mind for the answer to that, it turns out Race just didn't know what to do at that point.

I figured he'd come up with something, but as he was thinking, we heard this ringing sound. Race then took some handheld device out of his pocket. It looked like a police radio with a screen on it. And as he hit a button to turn the screen on, we saw a man who only appeared in silhouette.

"Hello? Neo Brigade?" The mysterious figure inquired.

"Uh, speaking? Who's this?" Race asked.

"I can't give my name, but I've been working for Cold Miner, and I think I can help you."

"You're one of the Chill-dren? How did YOU get on this frequency?" Nator queried.

"I have one of your Neo communicators. One of you must have left it behind during one of our last encounters."

"Oh yeah. I was wondering where that went." Bendy mentioned, looking guilty. A team communicator? I wasn't told about those. Though, I guess there was a lot about being part of this team I wasn't informed on.

"In any case, yes, I am a member of the Chill-dren. I've been in this to make some good cash, but I don't wanna be a part of Cold Miner's crazy schemes no more. Now, I wish to help you defeat him."

"You wanna do what?" Pyra questioned, incredulous.

"I can't keep this life of crime up any further. I just wanted to do some theft, but I didn't sign up for this whole city in ice thing. I think I can help you put a stop to this."

"Really? You wanna help us? Okay, we're listening." Race told him, sounding optimistic.

"Time out. Just why should we trust you, anyway?" Nator inquired the figure. "You haven't even identified yourself."

"I can't give my name. Cold Miner still thinks I'm working for him. If my identity ever got out, my life could be in jeopardy. My family too." The anonymous caller explained.

"Yeah, Nator. He has to protect his life. Come on." Race told the cyborg before addressing the renegade Chill-dren minion again.

"For the sake of conversation, you can just call me Don Crimel."

"Okay, Don Crimel, where can we find Cold Miner?"

"His hideout is underground. You'll have to go to the old Miner City subway. Let me know when you get there and I'll guide you further."

The informant hung up as the communicator screen went to black. This was quite unexpected, but fortuitous, certainly.

"Alright! What luck! We've got some more help! Okay, team, let's go to the subway." Race ordered the group, about to leave. However, Nator stepped in the speedster's way.

"Whoa! Wait a minute! Some stranger tells you he works for Cold Miner and suddenly you're taking directions from him? Are you crazy?" Nator scolded the team leader, not finding any logic in his plan.

"No. He'd be crazy if this was the *only* instance of him accepting irrational assistance." Pyra mentioned, glaring at me at the end.

"Yeah, Race. How do we know this guy isn't just gonna freeze us as soon as we set foot on his doorstep?" Bendy added. "I mean, sure, it'd be fine if this was some crank call. But this guy's got my old communicator."

"Guys, come on. We can't just pass on this. We actually have an ace in the hole here." Race reasoned.

"If you go along with this, that's just what you'll be: an ace in the hole. And by that, I mean you, Ace, will be six feet in the ground." Nator argued.

"Look, I know this isn't my place since I'm the new girl here, but, Race, they kinda have a point. I mean, don't you think this is a little risky?"

"Guys, we'll never find him if we don't try this. Now, let's go." Race concluded, walking to the bank exit.

"Ugh. You're not gonna talk him out of this?" Pyra sighed, addressing Tel-E.

"I trust him." Tel-E answered firmly as Pyra rolled her eyes.

Race may have been the only guy who fully supported me being on the team, but even I had to admit he was being a bit reckless in deciding what to do. He was like an old Sci-Fi captain or fantasy Sci-Fi wizard general, going with the unorthodox route. I shouldn't complain since he was taking a chance on me, but it still just seemed odd.

But, like Tel-E, I had to trust him. I owed him that much for bringing me in so quickly. I was still so new to this city and he was one of the only people I could really get along with. I'd rather not ruin that so soon. So I just rolled with it like the rest of the team.

We all proceeded down to the city subway. It was dark and abandoned. Apparently, it was supposed to be put back in operation in a few months, but I guess the icy roads came in a little too early.

It was so dark down there; I used my hair to form some lights just to make things brighter. As we continued moving through the area, we reached a subway platform and Race's team communicator rang. He answered it with Don Crimel, still in silhouette, appearing on the screen as we all crowded around to look at him.

"Are you in the subway?" Don Crimel asked.

"Yep. So how do we find the hideout?" Race inquired.

"You'll have to look for the big blue stone on the wall across from the north side of the platform. Press it, and it should reveal the entrance."

Not even waiting for us to ask a question if we had one, Crimel hung up. We looked across the far track to the wall, which, sure enough, contained a big blue section.

"The blue stone? Alright. Let's go." Race told everyone.

"It's a trap. I'm telling you." Nator warned the team leader sort of musically.

"Look, I'm sure it's fine. Bendy, press the stone."

"No way, man. What if that thing's rigged to explode? Do you even know what you're getting me into? I'm not liking this." Bendy objected.

"What's your problem? You're a daredevil. Isn't danger your thing?" Race queried.

"It is when I know what's coming. When I jump over a pit of fire, I expect I might get burned, not sucked into a black hole."

"Why not make Ellie open it?" Pyra suggested. I was a little concerned that I would get thrown into immediate peril for being the new girl, but I knew I wasn't gonna get anywhere in this city being nervous.

"Well, I guess I've always wanted to see a black hole up close." I remarked.

Going along with this, I slowly extended my hand over to the wall, and pressed it forward to the wall as the blue stone almost felt like a large button that moved forward just a little and back when I let go.

Once I hit the stone, fog emerged from the cracks in the wall. It was then that I noticed part of the wall that was just a little bit out of place from the rest of it, which then split down the mid-section, revealing some light beneath the fog. And, like an automatic door, the wall opened by moving those halves to either side with the blue stone on one half. As it opened, more fog spewed out with additional lights that led into a tunnel with stairs leading down like an entrance to some ancient temple.

"Hmm. Looks like an entrance to me." Race commented, pleased to see our informant was correct.

"This changes nothing." Pyra mumbled.

We all made our way to that door, slowly going through the entrance and down the stairs into a hallway.

“This is so exciting! I've never been in a real supervillain hideout before.” I uttered in enthusiasm.

“Well, none of us have ever been in here. So we'd best remain undetected while no one knows we're here.” Tel-E cautioned me as we continued down a hall. And, as if on cue, we heard footsteps coming from a hall going perpendicular to the one we were in.

As we were in an enemy hideout, we obviously weren't alone. Our plan to remain undetected was in danger of being compromised by three Chill-dren minions who were entering our hall, even turning in our direction!

No one really panicked. We just had to stay calm and hide. Race instantly dashed for cover, having been on a surface where his super speed worked. Tel-E then levitated to the ceiling while Pyra vanished in a puff of dark fire. That left just me, Bendy, and Nator. We turned and found some crates near the wall we could hide behind. There were only a few crates though, not enough to cover three people. So Nator and I hid behind them while Bendy just curled his body around the edges with everyone staying completely out of sight.

We were all a little nervous about this. Luckily, neither Nator nor Bendy were looking at me when they took their positions behind the crates, so it was okay that I wasn't smiling. However, where I was, I could see through a gap in the boxes, giving me a perfect view of the Chill-dren passing by while they made their way to the exit. We just had to stay quiet until they left.

However, they must have heard us breathing quietly but anxiously, for as I saw them go by the crates, one of the Chill-dren turned to us. I didn't think she'd see us, but I instantly jerked my head to the side, keeping out of her sight. Not to avoid detection, but to keep from getting an electric shock from not smiling when the Chill-dren minion saw me, whether she could tell I was smiling or not.

Luckily, she must have thought it was nothing and continued to the exit with her colleagues. With the area clear, the Brigade came out of hiding, going back to where we were.

"That was close. Man, I feel like we're in a stealth video game." I commented, relieved, then excited, looking to get my required smirk back.

"This is NOT a game." Pyra affirmed.

"I know. The enemies in real life don't have such a limited range of view." I replied as Pyra just rolled her eyes again.

"Let's keep moving. Pyra, you can move through the air without being seen. You'll have to scout the path ahead before we move on." Race explained.

"Oh! I can help too!" I added, morphing into a character called Camille Wonder and showed off her invisibility powers.

I could tell Pyra wanted as little to do with me as possible, which became more evident as she was reluctant to go along with me. So I just moved through the hall, staying invisible. With the character's abilities working, I checked every hall carefully before altering back to Camille's visible form to wave to the team that the corridor was clear.

I continued going through the halls, signaling them to hide if someone was around. With this process working with no problem, we made it to a larger hallway with no Chill-dren, but more ice. We discovered this as we felt an intense rumbling on the ground as we all dropped to the ground while dust fell from the ceiling. The rumbling might not have been much, but as soon as it ceased, we found ice expanding all the way to the floor of the hideout. The place was no longer free of ice as Race realized when he slipped on his face again.

As we all wondered what could have happened, our answer man, Don Crimel, suddenly called Race's communicator again as the Brigade leader quickly picked up.

"Uh, Don? What was that?" Race inquired.

"Cold Miner's used his pickaxe to freeze everything again. You'll have to hurry if you wanna stop him from making things worse." Don Crimel warned us.

"Oh man. I don't like the idea of 'worse'. Especially if that means no friction." Race mentioned, struggling to stand up with the ice on the floor.

"Well, what'd you expect? You came into Cold Miner's hideout wearing sneakers." Nator acknowledged.

"Hey, you try running all the time wearing boots or cleats."

As we were in that current hallway, we were in front of two large doors, one open and one closed, but which began to slowly open. There were obviously some more Chill-dren coming, so we could only hide again, this time, behind a row of barrels just by the door. As we saw who came out, there were actually only two Chill-dren minions who walked out this time. As they passed us, Don Crimel was still on the line.

"I can see you all from the security station. That door is a shortcut to Cold Miner's location." Don Crimel informed us.

He was referring to the door that just opened. So as the Chill-dren left we all snuck over to it, going through. However, since the Chill-dren just used it, it was set to close, and much quicker than we anticipated. Five of us made it through, but it closed shut just before Tel-E could join us.

"Tel-E!" Race cried as the door closed.

". . . It won't open." Tel-E told us as we heard her trying to get in.

"Then let's make it open." I suggested, growing my hair to form some dynamite.

"No! If we break it, someone will know we're here." Race warned me as his communicator was still on.

"You can only open that door using a key card. I'm afraid the girl's stuck out there." Crimel informed us.

"It's okay, everyone. I'll just go the long way around and meet you later." Tel-E told the team.

"Just be careful." Race called to the alien. "Okay, team, let's keep moving."

"Look, Race, as much as I'd love to go along with your ingenious plan of wandering through an enemy lair based on what

one of his henchmen tells you, I really think we should at least find a map of the area.” Nator proposed following his sarcasm.

“You can download a map from a computer at the south corridor, but I can assure you it's well-guarded. I can still see you from the security cameras. You'd better let me guide you to Cold Miner so you can find him quicker.” Crimel advised the team.

“Sorry, Nator, but I gotta go with finding him quicker.” Race concluded.

“Okay, now continue down to the end of that hall and make a right. And don't worry. There are no guards currently in the vicinity.”

“Down the hall and to the right. No problem.”

Like a trained toddler, Race proceeded down the hall as told, not even trying to be stealthy anymore. But Crimel was right. There weren't any guards, so we followed him.

“Man, it's like he's blind and can run by just listening. He's crazier than me.” Bendy commented in disbelief.

“Well, I'm sure you guys must admire Race's skills and instincts if you made him your leader.” I inferred as the three of them laughed.

“Hmph. Yeah, sure, it was a unanimous vote.” Pyra sarcastically replied.

“Oh yeah. He inspired us, alright.” Bendy chuckled.

“What do you mean?”

“Let's just say the position of leader was open at the time and no one but Race could fill it.” Nator answered.

We continued down another hall as Race led with nothing but confidence, not even afraid of what he might find.

“Where to next, Don?” Race asked our informant.

“Continue down to your left. But be careful. Two Chill-dren are heading your way.” Crimel warned us as we heard footsteps behind us.

Following that guidance, we knew we had to take cover once again. There weren't any crates or barrels around, but we did find a nearby supply closet that we could all fit into. Pyra chose to

disappear into the air again, though. But the rest of us went inside as two more Chill-dren walked by.

"Are you sure we should be down here?" One of the Chill-dren asked her cohort.

"You heard the boss' orders. Anyone not outside has to be either on the lower floor or in the lounge. And there's no way I'm makin' the extra walk." The second Chill-dren minion explained.

"I just can't wait 'til we finish this operation so we don't have to look out for any more trouble."

The two minions continued their strolling going further from us. I realized that there were only two, and I understood playing it safe, but it's not like we couldn't handle them. That's when I was getting some ideas on how to make this fun, or at least maintain my smile as I had to hide.

"Hey, Crimel, what's this operation they're talking about?" Nator questioned our anonymous assistant.

"That's not important. Just keep moving so you can find the elevator to the lower floor, and to Cold Miner." Crimel answered.

"Hey, Don, is the area mostly clear around here?" I inquired.

"Right now, besides those two Chill-dren, there's no one too close."

"Alright! We can take 'em out!" I suggested.

"What? No! . . . I mean . . . I'd rather you didn't. I mean, I still work with these people."

"Aw, come on. Stealth isn't fun without a sneak attack." I argued, forming my hair into a blaster to aim at the two Chill-dren as I inched my way out of the closet.

"Ellie, no!" Race cried, pulling me back as I took a shot and missed.

"What was that?" One of the Chill-dren asked, bewildered. I could tell they were ready to start checking the area for the source of that attack. Instinctively, the whole team just kept quiet like we would die if we even breathed.

"I think it came from down there." The other minion acknowledged as I heard one of them approach the closet.

"Let's check it out."

"No! You know the orders. Let's keep moving."

Fortunately, the two minions had continued down the hall in the direction they started. With the coast clear, we went back out into the hall.

"That was too close." Race sighed. "Ellie, next time someone says we shouldn't fight, can you maybe show some more restraint?"

"Sorry. I was just gonna stun them." I apologized. "I mean, we could've stuffed them in the closet here."

"Yeah, well, just save that 'til after Crimel leads us to Cold Miner."

After giving me heat for my ideas, Race put his face back into that Neo Brigade communicator to talk to someone who wasn't in the Neo Brigade. Don Crimel continued giving directions as Race followed without question as we followed our leader again.

"Crimel, Crimel, Crimel. You had the right idea, Hairpiece." Benny informed me.

"At least someone had their own initiative." Nator added with a sigh.

I'll admit Race was relying on Crimel a bit much, but I wasn't looking to argue with him on this. At least not when his plan seemed to be working. And certainly not after he welcomed me to his team so quickly.

As I cautiously continued down one more hall with the Brigade while Race's eyes were buried in that communicator like someone spending too much time on their cell phone, we eventually reached one final door in front of us.

"Okay, so we're down corridor H, and where next?" Race inquired our helper.

"Right through that door." Crimel said.

"Through the door. Got it."

"And yet he couldn't be further from getting it." Pyra mumbled, rolling her eyes.

Race opened said door, leading to a room with not a whole lot. Certainly not Cold Miner. The only thing to note was the big square pedestal in the middle of the room with five sections on the top of it.

"Cold Miner is on the floor directly below you. Take the elevator down and you'll have him." Crimel briefed us.

"And this room is supposed to have an elevator, you say?" I questioned, looking around to find nothing.

"There should be a square lift in the middle of the room. That's the elevator. Now, do you see the five floor panels on it?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, with the exception of the person monitoring security, that's me, the Chill-dren are required to stay in groups of at least five in case we have to go into battle. And to assure these groups stay together, this hideout doesn't have any stairs. Instead, we have the elevator here that requires five people to stand on it in order to work."

"Hmm. Seems like nice organization if at times inconvenient." Nator commented.

It did seem a little unusual, but I could kind of agree with the logic. We were ready to approach the elevator when our timing worked out perfectly as Tel-E entered the room, having caught up with us.

"Guys! You're here! Thank goodness." Tel-E said, happy to see us.

"Hey, Tel-E, you're just in time. Come over here. We all need to stand on this elevator to get to Cold Miner." Race told her as she walked towards the team.

"So this is the elevator?" Tel-E inquired as she stepped on the panels with the rest of us. I was about to get on, but Bendy pushed me off, getting on in my place as he chuckled. At that moment, we all heard a beeping noise, so something was about to happen.

“Yeah, that Don Crimel says it requires five people to stand on it. Isn’t it cool? Just like co-op video games where both players have to hit something simultaneously to advance in the level.” I enthusiastically noted.

“Yeah, 'cause that's what everyone was thinking.” Pyra sarcastically remarked.

“Apparently, there aren't any stairs here because Cold Miner wants at least five Chill-dren together at all times, so they have this elevator to keep people from going through floors by themselves. Neat, huh?” Race explained.

“Wait! Not neat! Guys, I just remembered. On our way here, we passed by only two Chill-dren, and when we came in through that door, there were two Chill-dren too and only three before that.” Nator recalled.

“Dude's got a super powered memory. Just sayin'.” Bendy whispered, stretching his neck to me.

“How could there be required groups of five if those guys were in pairs?”

“Uh, I don't know. Maybe they just weren't following the protocol and didn't need to move between floors. The point is Don Crimel said the elevators require five people, so what's there to wonder?” Race argued.

“Actually, there is one other peculiar thing I noticed. You mentioned there being no stairs, but on my way here, I passed by several elevators with signs that said 'All elevators out of order until further notice. Please take the stairs.'” Tel-E recalled.

“Wait? So there ARE stairs?” Bendy asked. “Race, I thought Crimel said there weren't any of those here.”

“This doesn't make any sense. Why would Crimel lie about that?” Race wondered.

“Well, one thing's for sure. The elevators I passed didn't look anything like this one.” Tel-E noted, looking down at the elevator we were on. “It looked like anyone could go in on their own.”

“But were there at least Chill-dren in big groups when you saw them?”

“No, but that's another interesting thing. I analyzed their thoughts to see what I could learn about Cold Miner, and it turns out they've all been ordered to stay in groups of at most four, meaning there can't be five or more people together.”

Okay. This just wasn't adding up. Groups of no more than five? Elevators out of order? I was starting to think Don Crimel was the one in need of an informant. Just what was he talking about?

“If there can't be groups of five or more, why would this elevator require five people?” Bendy questioned.

“More importantly, why would Don Crimel tell us the elevator needs five people standing on it?” Pyra queried with suspicion.

“I think the real question is if no one should be in fives, and all the elevators are out of order, then what is it we're standing on?” Nator inquired as the “elevator” beeped again.

Something big was about to happen, and Tel-E was the first one to realize it. Thinking quickly, she shoved Race off the floor panel right as a large glass tube instantly lowered from the ceiling, surrounding everyone but Race and I. Either someone was just stealing my idea, or this was a problem.

“Whoa, it's a trap!” I cried, stepping back as the tube came down.

This was all so unexpected. So much so that my initial facial reaction did not include a smile. And as the Brigade looked at me and Race, I could feel some shocks coming on. It hurt like usual, but I couldn't let them see this happen to me, not while they were being ambushed like this. Keeping my weakness hidden, I turned my head to avoid all eye contact.

Once I did so, in the corner of my eye, I could see the tube descending down to a lower floor. Race and I weren't going to let it go without us, so as the capsule lowered, we jumped on top and rode it down to its destination. As it reached the floor, Race and I jumped off and saw our team still contained inside.

“Guys! Oh man! Are you okay?” Race anxiously queried the Brigade, putting his hands on the tube.

"We're fine, but I wouldn't be calm just yet." Tel-E replied, trying to blast her way out of the tube with her mind energy, but with no effect.

"Race! This doesn't count as an elevator!" Pyra affirmed, failing to break out with her fire.

"Yeah! Are you sure Crimel was right about this?" Bendy added.

"I told you we should've gotten a map!" Nator reminded the speedster who instantly took out his communicator after everyone failed to shatter the glass prison surrounding the four teens.

"Uh . . . Crimel? Don? You there?" Race said into his communicator.

"Oh, I'm here." A voice said from the back of the room.

Race and I, mostly Race, looked relieved hearing him and knowing that he was there. But some things are often best not seen so we can be free to frolic in the illusions and fantasies we paint for ourselves. We realized that as our hope from an ally turned to danger as we turned around and didn't see a silhouette, but Cold Miner himself in the back of the room behind an army of Chill-dren pointing their ice pistols at us.

"And you're right where I want you." Cold Miner concluded with a grin.

"Cold Miner?" Race cried.

I have to say. I did not see this coming. I should've known what I was getting into. All my life, I've fantasized about doing good and fighting evil like the heroes on TV, but this was the moment I realized I should have listened to Tel-E. The moment I realized I should have quit while I was ahead. Because the Knowlgian was right. This situation was so new to me. Foiling the bank robbery was fun. Stopping a villain when I got to Minor City was fun. This was something else entirely. What made this different, you ask? Well, there was no way I could keep a smile the whole way.

Back in Ohio, me and my best friend would play with our powers in our hometown of zero crime. There was never any

danger to deal with. It was all pure fun. This right here, this was my first sense of actual danger. A villain actually trapped a hero team, my allies, and from the surprise of seeing this and what I thought might come of it, I lost my smile again. And with all those eyes staring at me, I felt an electric shock coming.

But this time it was a bigger surge of electrocution. I wasn't aware of it originally, but it must be that the more people who see me not smiling, the more painful the shock is. I felt so much more from this, which became so much more that I needed to hide.

"Heh heh heh. Race, you gullible idiot, I knew you'd let me lead you fools into my grasp."

"Lead us? Wait . . . Don Crimel was . . ."

"I can see you all from the security station. That door is a shortcut to Cold Miner's location." Cold Miner said in Don Crimel's voice. He then held up the missing Neo Brigade communicator. "Heh! Race, you make it all too easy to deceive you."

So it was Cold Miner all along. I knew there was something fishy about this. It couldn't have been that simple for us to get here. Poor Race was so sure about this. So full of hope. I could only feel bad for him, which didn't present me as appearing visibly happy to all the eyes staring me down. In my pity, I felt more electric damage me from my neck going down. With that pain, I couldn't hide it anymore and dropped to my knees while I held my neck.

"Whoa! Ellie!" Race uttered, bewildered by seeing me get hurt.

"Urgh. I'm . . . I'm good. It's nothing." I lied, keeping my head down.

"Oh man. What is going on here? Cold Miner was the informant? How did THIS happen?"

"Don't act so surprised. I knew you'd want the easy shortcut. You'd trust anyone who says they can help you even when you know nothing about them. And the moment you do, that's when you're just blindly walking down a path that leads to a deep dark hole."

I could see Race looking down at me while I was being electrocuted. I realized he was being filled with disappointment, but not just in himself.

"Okay, so you wanted to lead us to you to get us in this tube? Is that it?" Nator asked the villain.

"Well, I was hoping to get all five of you, but at least I'll have four of Race's suckers in my trap. And once my machine here finishes charging up, you four will be flash frozen with nothing being strong enough to thaw you out." Cold Miner explained as we looked at the mechanical device connected to the capsule the team was inside. It had a gauge meter that slowly increased from about halfway, and was ready to activate once the meter was full.

"Say what? No one puts the Neo Brigade in permanent cryo-sleep while I'm around! Pyra, seep outta here and get 'em!" Bendy commanded the team's fiery fighter, pointing forward.

Just like she's done before, Pyra ignited herself in dark fire to disappear in a puff of it, mixing her ashes into the air. However, after a couple seconds, she reappeared, still inside the capsule.

"Ugh! There aren't any openings in this thing! I'm stuck with you guys. Way to go, Race." Pyra groaned.

"Oh man, this is all my fault. Guys, I . . . I didn't . . ." Race uttered with regret, seeing his team imprisoned.

"Save it, Ace. You've told us things that landed us in here. We don't need you telling us anything else." Nator interrupted.

"Heh! Your final words from your friends. Now, Race, I wasn't expecting you to bring along some ringer to your team, but as long as you're both out of my prison, I think I'll just stick your bodies in my freezer right now." Cold Miner declared as his crew prepared to fire on us with their ice weapons.

This was all looking tumultuous, but, despite all this, I managed to get something close to a grin to face these guys down. Once I got that smile out, I looked up, hoping that forced smirk would provide me both safety and confidence.

"I may be new here, but I know well enough not to give up without a fight." I insisted, growing my hair out as the Chill-dren shot ice energy at Race and I.

Before it could reach us, I grew my hair out in front to absorb the shot as my wall of hair suddenly froze. Forming a new battle tactic, I detached the frozen wall of hair from the rest of it and extended my hair down to grab that frozen bit. I then swung it out at many of the Chill-dren, knocking a few of them away.

“So you wanna resist me, do you? So be it. Chill-dren! It's play time!” Cold Miner announced.

Not only were the Chill-dren we saw in the room ready to retaliate, but Cold Miner had actually called in more minions who entered from several doors ahead of us in that room. Before I knew it, that Chill-dren army almost tripled in size.

“Whoa. That's a lot of 'em.” Race muttered, concerned.

“Well, then it's time to make fewer of 'em.” I affirmed.

Going back to my characters for this, I transformed into a villainous alien named Queen Fungoob, a green mushroom headed monster. She had all the Sci-Fi moves to help us, which I used by starting with her force field I summoned around me and Race, protecting us from the ice energy. I then turned to the offense by shooting some energy blasts from her hands through the field.

But before I could hit them, the Chill-dren seemed to have an extra feature attached to their ice pistols. As they held their weapons out, small energy shields emerged, protecting the head of each minion as their guns were held up. My attack had no effect against that.

So rather than try again with what wasn't working, I utilized another ability of mine. Whenever I transform into a character, I can also summon any compatible characters or minions they're known for working with, which I can control. The characters don't become as powerful when I do this, and there is a random time limit of at least three minutes for multiple characters before they all disappear.

But that's how much time I was counting on using. In a white beam, I summoned some Fungoob minions to appear and run at the Chill-dren as they fired their own energy guns. As I started that minion war to keep his minions busy, they wound up

freezing some of Queen Fungoob's own cronies while Cold Miner tried firing his own ice energy at my force field. He tried to penetrate my barrier, but I kept it going strong while Race seemed more relieved that I really had a lot to help him.

"What's wrong, Race? You're just gonna hang back while the real heroes fight your battles?" Cold Miner taunted the speedster.

"Yeah! Who are you, the Chief?" Bendy added similarly.

"Bendy!" Tel-E scolded the stretcher.

"Just motivating him."

"I don't know. The Chief earned HIS job." Pyra noted.

However honest they were, the Brigade certainly drove Race into the battle as he looked directly out at Cold Miner like a determined traveler willing to survive a three-day journey on his own.

"I let you capture my friends. I'm not leaving without fixing this." Race affirmed before he dashed out of my barrier.

The Brigade leader darted into several Chill-dren, knocking them down and dodging their attacks, even moving one minion's position, causing him to freeze a couple other Chill-dren. Race then turned to his main target, Cold Miner, who immediately swung his pickaxe down, sending a whole glacier of ice to the floor.

As Race was ready to take a charge at the Chill-dren's boss, the floor was already frozen. As you can guess, the next steps Race took resulted in him slipping and slowing, though still moving and staying on his feet. The Brigade leader wound up sliding upright over to Cold Miner while he struggled to keep from falling. Once he got to the villain, Cold Miner punched him in the face, knocking him down, and sending the speedster sliding on his back all the way down to the capsule encasing his team.

"Gee, and I thought you were done with me manipulating you." Cold Miner laughed before shooting more ice energy from his hands at the runner.

The miner missed as his energy wait right next to Race who ducked and slipped near the back wall. He fired another blast

Race's way as the speedster tried to dodge it by running and slipping back in the other direction. He ended up running back and forth as Cold Miner kept taking shots at him as if he was intentionally missing to see him struggle.

"That's right, kid. Dance for your Uncle Sammy." Cold Miner chuckled.

Race just kept slipping and trying to stay unfrozen as he'd quickly get up to move wherever he could, not even trying to attack at this point. However, after a few seconds of this, he slipped and landed on his back again, leaving him unable to get up as quick as he could before. With this, Cold Miner had a much better shot at getting him. He raised his hands and fired one more blast of ice energy at the runner. But before he did, I grabbed a Fungoob minion and chucked it in front of the blast, causing it to freeze instead of Race.

Not taking my interference lightly, Cold Miner charged his way down the room, slamming Fungoob minions out of his way like an angry bull. He kept his pickaxe in hand and swung it down with a mighty lunge, landing a blow on my force field. With such a powerful impact from his strength and its power, my barrier vanished. I know my force field was supposed to be impenetrable, which was a problem for my defense tactics, but I don't care. That was just cool. Though, cool notwithstanding, I went back to dealing with the Chill-dren before Cold Miner could take another swing at me.

Optional Dialogue 2

For Race, he was the main target for the Chill-dren leader. Just to humiliate the speedster, he wasn't even trying to freeze him anymore. He chose to pick Race up by the shirt and slam him down on the floor.

"Come on, fearless leader! Show me your stuff!" Cold Miner demanded.

The Brigade leader tried taking a swipe at the miner, but the ice on the floor didn't give him the confidence to use the

super speed. Going at a regular punching velocity, Cold Miner simply grabbed Race's fist like it was nothing before swinging him over onto the floor again. While Race was lying there, hurt, Cold Miner kept this up by picking him up with one hand again, this time, sliding him into another wall.

"You're not impressing me." Cold Miner said, not satisfied.

Race wanted to take another run at him, but, without his speed, the villain knocked him down one more time and threw him down the room into another wall. When he made it there, sliding on the ice, his legs wound up above him against the wall as he hit it. While he was in that position, Cold Miner projected more ice energy, which hit the runner's legs, freezing them. This resulted in him hanging upside down like a fish that got caught.

"Well, I suppose I overestimated your resistance. Still, it's been fun." Cold Miner commented, holding his hand out, about to freeze the Brigade leader entirely.

I didn't join this team to let anyone get beaten like that. After I dealt with a few more Chill-dren minions with some alien energy, I morphed back to normal and formed a giant stone fist with my hair, punching Cold Miner away from the speedster. Once he was away, I turned that part of my hair into a welding torch to melt the ice covering Race's legs.

"This is SO not my day." Race anxiously moaned as he continued hanging upside down.

"So I'm assuming it gets better?" I inferred.

"Look out!"

Suddenly, as I turned, the first thing I found was Cold Miner's pickaxe flying at me like the hammer of a god. Fortunately, I grew my hair in time to block it by forming my hair into a metal shield. It may have protected me, but it also knocked me back into the wall, which didn't feel much better.

After that impact, the pickaxe flew back to Cold Miner's hand as the villain projected further ice energy at me. With all the ice he packed, I decided to transform into a new character. This one was a pyro-kinetic martial arts expert called Jember. Using her power, I blocked the ice blasts with the fire from her own hands,

not unlike Pyra, before attacking the Chill-dren leader. Jember had flames, Cold Miner had ice. This didn't take a genius.

"You may have the power, but science and RPGs agree. Fire always beats ice." I affirmed.

"Uh, Ellie?" Race uttered with less confidence than me.

I immediately projected a whole firestorm at the ice man. I couldn't see anything at all past the inferno, but I expected to see him unable to fight as soon as the flames cleared. But I didn't have to wait for that, for the next thing I saw was Cold Miner running through the inferno and punching me back into the wall with a hit that forced me to morph back to normal.

"Just a small note: Cold Miner is immune to heat." Tel-E informed me, still inside the tube.

"An ice villain that can withstand fire? Okay, that is just plain awesome." I eagerly stated.

"Time for me to wipe that childish smile off your face, new girl!" Cold Miner warned me. Not good. "Switch to the smoke setting, Chill-dren!"

As I looked at his minions, they all hit a switch on their pistols before firing at me again, only instead of ice energy, it was smoke. The room was filling with fog, and, while I could still fight okay, it did slow me down a little. But there was an effect from that smoke that I found to be even worse, I'm afraid.

"Your smoke won't stop me from . . . aaaah!" I articulated with authority before the smoke got into my lungs.

Now, that scream wasn't from me coughing. I just think if you've been in a room of smoke, you don't smile as much as you're trying to keep from breathing it. And that's what happened. I was in a room full of smoke, surrounded by a hoard of people. Those two combined resulted in me getting shocked repeatedly. Forcing a smile through an unfortunate situation was one thing, but trying to not choke doesn't give you a range of facial options beyond the look of smelling something terrible.

The shocks were long and excruciating as I attempted to fight back. But all that zapping just drained all the energy I had that I wasn't using to get through the smoke in the air. The longer

the shocks went on, the more the Brigade picked up on what occurred.

“Whoa! He has smoke that creates electricity?” Bendy said in disbelief.

“Ellie! I could use a hand here!” Race hollered from across the room as he continued to struggle against Cold Miner.

“I’m on it! . . . Ah!”

I did my best to hide that weakness of mine by getting the closest to a smile that I could muster, but it wasn’t enough. Nothing I tried was enough. The smoke only kept me appearing less feminine than I was supposed to. I tried to cover my face to shield it from the smoke so I could at least get a grin going, but the constant electric shocks made me clutch my chest and neck to lessen the pain.

“What is she doing?” Pyra inquired, turning to Tel-E.

“Ellie! Help!” Race cried again.

“Don’t worry . . .” I coughed in between another couple shocks. “I . . . I’m coming. Just . . . hold on!”

I tried extending my hair to Cold Miner, but as soon he looked at me as he pummeled Race further, I received yet another electric shock, allowing Cold Miner to unintentionally stop my attack.

I knew I couldn’t beat him if I still had his gaze, so I had to leave Race to get a break from the zapping. Just for a few seconds. That’s all I needed. So I turned my head away from him, but that only led to another Chill-dren minion, which, in turn, led to another zap through my neck. With that minion there, I could only turn to a different direction. I did, but there waited the eye contact of another Chill-dren crony. To get some breathing room after yet another shock, I turned away from her to another part of the room. It didn’t work.

Every way I turned my head, there was another minion looking at me and another electric shock delivered. I kept trying and trying to find a vacant section, but it was full. The room wasn’t a torture chamber, but those minions might as well have been carrying Tasers to attack with, because that was all I felt.

They didn't have to do anything but look at me and I was getting fried.

With every enemy I encountered, I just wanted to run away. Run away from the danger where no one had to look at me. I tried one more time to get a sight devoid of a person's view, not just to survive, but to keep the Neo Brigade from finding out this weakness of mine. I didn't see any Chill-dren this time. Instead, it was the Neo Brigade themselves I found staring at me. They just looked both concerned and bewildered seeing me not fight but suffer from all the electrocution.

"Ellie!" Tel-E cried, putting her hands against the tube with concern.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry." I mumbled, putting my head down.

What was I doing? I was about to both zap my life away, trying to get through real danger. But, more importantly, I was about to let the Neo Brigade down. Let Race down. I wasn't fooling them this time. They were seeing me as someone who was never some perfect girl. I was able to screw up like everyone else, though even worse with what was happening to me.

As I looked at them and realized how disappointing I looked to them, I began to think maybe it would have been better if I never tried. Maybe it would have been better if I was alone after all. Sure. I wouldn't have any friends, but I wouldn't be getting electrocuted. What did this mean, though? Do people who only look out for themselves, living a solitary life, do they have the best and longest lives?

I never wanted to find that out, but I didn't think I'd be proving the contrary. If the electric shocks weren't going to finish me, Cold Miner taking advantage of my weakness would.

"Hmm. Well, isn't this fortunate. Your ringer seems more susceptible to my smoke than I thought." Cold Miner surmised with a smirk.

"I'm not . . . giving up on these guys." I asserted, using whatever focus I had to whip my hair at some Chill-dren minions as I continued enduring those painful frown shocks when I turned back around.

As if I wasn't surrounded by people looking at me enough, Cold Miner and more of the Chill-dren surrounded Race and I, literally with our backs to the wall, as we could only see minions in our sight. Meanwhile, Cold Miner turned to look at the machine imprisoning the Neo Brigade, having quite the satisfied smile. I guess that made one of us.

"It seems I won't have much trouble having your friends permanently frozen after all. It's only a matter of time before they're nothing but ice sculptures for my living room."

"I won't let you hurt them." Race insisted as he slipped on the ice again and held onto me so he wouldn't fall. "Uh, Ellie, you got anything we can use right now? 'Cause that would be great."

"There's too many of them. I don't know what I can do." I answered with doubt.

"Race! Ellie! You have to get out of here! Save yourselves!" Tel-E hollered to us.

"Uh, you mean after they save us, right?" Bendy asked, not thrilled with what Tel-E said.

"I'm not leaving without you guys!" Race affirmed.

"Don't worry. I wasn't gonna let any o' you leave anyway." Cold Miner noted with a grin. "You can fire when ready, Chill-dren!"

Cold Miner raised his pickaxe at Race and I as all the Chill-dren pointed their ice pistols at us. I could see small light blue orbs of energy materializing from the tips of the guns. They were about to freeze the two of us, which only made me more worried and more times electrocuted to go with it.

"Race, I really think we should listen to Tel-E right now." I suggested.

"No! I . . . I can do this. Just let me think." Race muttered in anxiety. At that point, I could see our enemies' weapons glow with the energy they were about to fire at us.

"Race?" I uttered, feeling uneasy of what was coming.

Finally, Cold Miner and the Chill-dren fired a round of ice energy at me and Race all at once. It was clear we weren't going to win this. We were outnumbered and I was still getting electric

shocks from looking too concerned. And, to make it worse, I knew if I was to get frozen without a happy face, I'd still get electrocuted if someone looked at me, and there was nothing I could do about it.

My only battle strategy was to survive, at that point. After receiving a couple more shocks, I managed to morph into one more character. This one was a ghost character named Alex Specter, the titular teenage character from one of my favorite cartoons. As a ghost, I used her abilities to grab Race and turn intangible with him before the ice energy could reach us. After that, I flew the speedster through a wall, evading a cryogenic prison, and fleeing from the room.

We were safe then. But, as I flew with Race, I could still hear Cold Miner during our escape.

"What? Gone?" Cold Miner barked in surprise and anger as I could hear him scream and hit what sounded like one of his henchmen.

"Yeah! Chew on that, Coldy! They got away!" Bendy celebrated.

"Yeah, if by that you mean they ditched us." Pyra said, not pleased.

"Oh, right. Race, come back!"

"And they also got beaten terribly after Ellie completely screwed up."

"Race! Ellie! Get your act together first!"

"You want we should go after them, boss?" One of the Chill-dren asked her leader.

"No. Let 'em go. The whole city should be frozen by now. They won't be doing much." Cold Miner explained before he shouted out to us. "You hear that, Race? All you can do is just slip and fall! You can hide, but you can't run!"

I heard Cold Miner laugh as I flew Race to an empty corridor near the hideout's entrance. We were safe. All the Chill-dren cronies were at the room with the Brigade, so we knew no one would find us that quickly.

As soon as we made it to that hall, I set Race down and walked a few yards away and collapsed on the floor. All I wanted was to lie there and rest so I could recover from all those electric shocks. I didn't wanna move or have anyone look at me. I just wanted to lie down and be alone. Be alone for the first time, mind you.

I only had one feeling as I had my back on the floor with my head face up as I panted in exhaustion. All I could feel was total failure. Both from how I got the Brigade captured, and how my powers, the part of me that I love so much, almost got me killed.

There were so many things I thought I could do as I dreamed of being a superhero. I thought I could face down a supervillain while having fun no matter what they tried. I thought I could use my powers to do just what I wanted. I thought I could successfully be in a superhero team with my best friend. Things weren't nearly as much fun as I fantasized.

The longer I resided in Minor City, the less I felt like I belonged here. The only place I thought I belonged was any place where I wouldn't have anyone to talk to.

But, as miserable as I was, I didn't wanna pass any of that on to Race. I especially didn't want him looking at me where I could get hurt again. So I did the best thing I could do in a situation like that. I chose to be positive, looking at the fact that he and I were okay, and so were the Neo Brigade at that point, and also that we could do better next time. With all this occupying my thoughts, I put on the closest thing to a smile I could at that point.

"That was too close." I muttered, catching my breath before getting that passable smirk back. "Okay, so now that we've made it past that, what would you normally do in this case? You know, just hypothetically."

As I tried sounding happy, Race looked away from me. He didn't turn to me to put my smile to the test at all. He just stayed looking away.

"Race?" I uttered as he still said nothing.

All he could bring himself to do was throw several angry punches at the wall.

“Stupid! Stupid! STUPID!” Race growled, slamming the wall with each “stupid” like a kid throwing a tantrum before he simply leaned his head against the wall and collapsed on the floor as his eyes began to water. “What was I thinking? My team . . . my friends just got captured! All because of me!”

“Oh . . . well . . . to be fair, Cold Miner had a lot to do with it too.” I stupidly attempted to cheer him up as I instantly did a face-palm soon after. “I mean, and so did I, but . . . look, Race. I know we lost that one, but the team isn't gone yet. There's still a chance we can save them.”

“No, there's not. It's hopeless. I tried to stop Cold Miner once and that cost me four friends.” Race replied, still in tears. “I just let everyone down.”

“Come on, Race. Pull yourself together. We can't quit now. The Brigade's depending on us.”

“Depending on me was their biggest mistake. I should've known Don Crimel wasn't a real ally.”

I wanted to tell Race that him depending on me was the biggest mistake he made after how I screwed everything up and that I wasn't much of an ally myself. But I didn't say that. I still remained upbeat.

“Come on. We can do it.” I reassured him, keeping my optimistic smile.

“No we won't.” Race realistically replied, still with a sense of failure as he kept his head down.

“Sure we will.”

“No we won't.”

“I know we can save the team.”

“WELL, WHAT DO YOU KNOW!?” Race snapped, whipping his head around to face me. I kept whatever type of smile I had as he looked all the more serious, avoiding another shock. But, evidently, smiling wasn't contagious at that point. “You don't know anything about me or what I can do! I do! I can't do anything! I cannot save them!”

After he growled at me, I just approached him delicately like you would with a bear on a chain.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry." I mumbled.

"Are you?" Race questioned my sincerity.

"Excuse me?" I uttered, surprised.

"I put my friends in danger and you're smiling at me? What are you smiling at!? What do you see here that is something to smile about?" Race barked.

He was right. He didn't know about any of this. He just saw some girl smiling after complete failure. It was time I told him the truth.

"Why am I smiling?" I said, ready to tell him. "Watch this."

At that point, as a non-verbal confession, I dropped my smile into a frown as our eyes were directed at one another. This triggered the very thing I hated about my powers as my lack of a smile in his sight gave me an electric shock through my neck. He could see what was happening, but he didn't need to see much of it. To keep it from continuing, I just looked away to cease the shocks after I could see he got the idea.

"So that's what that was? Is that . . . part of your powers?" Race queried, not knowing what to make of this part of me.

"Yes. Whenever someone looks at me and I'm not smiling, I get electrocuted. All I can do is either keep people from looking at my face, whether it's covered or not, or smile." I explained, not looking at Race. Although, I could hear some audible sounds of the Brigade leader being so dumbfounded by the very idea that the girl who had access to all these abilities came with such a bizarre weakness.

"You . . . you get shocked . . . if people look at you . . . and you're not smiling." Race surmised for himself, trying to get a grasp on how all this happened to him. "Why didn't you tell us this before?"

As something I was only hoping to rationalize to myself, this was hard to admit to another person.

"You . . . you saw all this stuff you liked about me and wanted me to join you. Just like that. I just thought if you knew

everything about me, you'd change your mind. If I impressed you that quickly, I figured it could have gone away just as fast. So I kept quiet." I explained, turning back around, finding a way to muster up a phony smirk.

There wasn't much to smirk about though. All I could feel was the guilt overflowing from within after I tried to get away with this secret.

"Hmph. Well, you kept a smile going longer than I could've to fool me." Race mumbled with regret on what occurred.

"Again, I'm sorry. I didn't mean any harm to come of this. But, hey, I've been able to elude electric shocks for a while now. Just because I made a mistake, it doesn't mean we can't fix this." I assured him.

"You, maybe. Me? I can't fix nothin'."

"Hey, come on. Don't say that. I bet you've been through worse. You're the leader. Surely you must have a plan."

"I'm no leader."

"Whaddaya mean? Of course you're a leader?"

"I am NOT a leader. Never was before, never should've been."

"But you must be. Why would you be leading the Neo Brigade if you weren't good at this?"

"The Chief is my dad!"

I didn't realize it back at the HQ, but Race and the Chief really were related. I was wondering why the Chief was so nice to him as opposed to the rest of the Brigade.

"He's your dad?" I asked.

"Yes! Look . . . it's not fair for me to be mad at you for keeping a secret to impress people. Just let me explain." Race began.

"Go on." I said, sitting down next to the speedster who let out a sigh.

". . . When the five of us were all together in one place for the first time, it was when we initially beat Cold Miner and his gang. After that, we all kinda decided to work together in case there was any more trouble in Minor City. Well, to do that, we

needed the Chief of police to give us proper authorization to let us work for the law. My dad took the responsibility of overseeing our activity and was basically in charge of what we all did. So when he decided which of us would be team leader, he insisted it be me.”

“So it wasn't anyone in the Brigade, not even you, who decided it should be you as leader. It was all your dad.” I inferred.

“Yeah, he just assigned me the job. I never even wanted to lead. Any of the other four guys would make way better leaders. I mean, Tel-E's the smartest girl in the world. She could think of anything for us. Nator's the other genius. He'd know what the team should do. Pyra, she's the sensible one. Anyone can follow her. Even Bendy, he's hardly afraid to run into danger. That has potential. Me? I have nothing!”

“Well, your dad must've seen something in you.”

“No. I've always been one of the least significant. My whole life before I got these powers, I was always the slow one in school. In gym, whenever we had to see how many times we could run from one end of the gym to the other, everyone could do over thirty. I'd always get tired after eight and collapse after twelve. All the fast kids would just pick on me after that, stealing my lunch and books because they knew I was too slow to chase after them. It was just dumb luck I got these powers. You know, I used to come from school every day and watch Forewarned.”

“You were a fan of the Forewarned TV series?”

“Oh, I loved all heroes with super speed. And when I'd see Forewarned just run and whoop all the bad guys and then everyone would love him as their defender, all I could think was, 'Someday, that'll be me.' And then I got my wish. Before I knew it, I was helping Tel-E fight off this alien psycho when she got to Earth. I got my powers and my best friend on the same day.” Race recalled, seeming to long for the better days.

“Well, that must've been awesome. You were slow and your powers became super speed? When does that ever happen?”

“Well, apparently, I'm the only one with this set of powers. The Charevo Gene lets you get powers based on who you are

through how you act, think, and are seen by others. Those are your Charevo Elements of Behavior, Mentality, and Identification. For me, my elements became Determination, Improvement, and Speed.” Race explained, pointing to each mark on the Charevo Emblem on his hand, which consisted of a mountain, a first aid kit, and a cheetah.

“Your Identification element is Speed? People saw you as speedy?” I asked, confused.

“I don’t know. My Charevo Gene’s probably just being sarcastic or something. Anyway, I was so excited to be able to run, I thought I could finally earn some respect and have people not think of me as weak and useless. But I never wanted the pressure of leading a team. Since I couldn’t escape such a responsibility, my goal from that day was to just not screw up. And now it’s all over.”

“It wasn’t your fault. Going from an average kid to a leader of superheroes is a lot of pressure for anyone. No one would expect you to be the best at it.”

“Yeah, well, my dad expects an awful lot. So to do a good job, I kept trying to make this super hard thing easier whenever I could. As time went on, I just kept cutting more corners and taking shortcuts, not even giving any thought for whatever could make my life easy.”

“So that’s why you were so quick to bring me onto your team.”

“Yeah, I just saw your powers and I thought, ‘Hey, she’ll make me look good.’ And then when Cold Miner called as a secret ally, I didn’t question it all like everyone else did. I just saw it as this lucky opportunity that would only lead to harder work if I passed on it. Some decision that was. I tried to be a good leader, and I just led everyone right into a huge pit.”

Talking with the Brigade leader, I began to learn Race’s life has been far more difficult than mine growing up. I didn’t have too many friends I could connect with so well, but he actually had bullies to deal with, having hardly anyone to defend him. I dreamed of being a superhero with powers for the pure fun of it.

He wanted to be a hero to with abilities just to be a better person. If any of us deserved what we got, it was him.

But to be leader too? That's something I pictured myself doing like with all my fantasies, but seeing Race have to deal with all the pressure crushing down on him, I wouldn't have wanted that responsibility either. Just another thing I had to learn about the reality of heroes.

"But this whole thing is on me now. You were only trying to help. I was the one who just went for all the good and didn't question any potential negatives." Race moaned.

"No. I was trying to get people to like me. At least you were always focused on getting things done." I argued.

"Yeah, well, I'm sure the best decision I can make is picking someone else as leader, because I can't do anything else for anyone."

"Well, Race, I've never been a leader before, but being a good leader isn't just about telling people what to do. Good leaders help their teams to do anything, to make everyone better, and even learn from them. Of course, you can still make your own decisions. I mean, look at me. You brought me on board and I was of some help. It's not like I self-destructed on you completely."

"Yeah, that's true. Why were you so quick to team up with us, anyway?"

"Are you kidding? After all the TV I've watched, to finally get superpowers, what girl wouldn't wanna be in a superhero team? That's why I came to Minor City."

"But you acted like you'd never heard of the Neo Brigade. You couldn't have seeked us out or anything. So why did you come to the city then? Were you planning on being by yourself?"

He knew my weakness. But Race didn't know everything. After listening to him, I figured I had to be more open about all this too.

"Well . . . No." I admitted, trying to maintain my forced smirk. "I came here with someone else when I fought the Gamer, but . . . it just didn't work out. This guy was my best friend my whole life. We were gonna have all this fun helping people

together. It started off well, but then we sorta got into an argument. And then he was gone. Just like that. And I didn't have anyone else in the city. I was on my own. And it just never felt good being alone. After that, I didn't think I'd have another friend the way I had him. Then I ran into you guys and you offered to let me join your group. And I didn't think twice about it. It just seemed like the best way I could do some good for the city, and also . . . to make some friends."

"Did you really think we wouldn't let you at least be our friend if you told us about your weakness?" Race questioned.

"I just couldn't risk it."

I wanted to make the Brigade leader understand what I had done. But as we talked, we could see a video screen in the hall showing video of Minor City. As we looked at it, we found the city had become completely covered in ice, totally frozen. It was like looking at an arctic superhero fortress, or at least a life sized ice sculpture of the town.

"Oh man, Cold Miner's done all that, and he's got our friends." Race moaned. "I'm going back."

"Well, I'm with ya. But do you think you can fight him in an area that looks like . . . that?" I asked, pointing to the frozen city on the screen.

". . . I honestly don't know."

Suddenly, in the middle of Race's struggle to come up with a plan, the mountain, first aid kit, and cheetah marks on his hands started glowing. And after about three seconds, some strange figures emerged from his hands. I didn't know if these were ghosts or what, but they just came out from those tattoos and floated up above the Brigade leader. What was interesting about them was they all resembled Race, but also the marks on his hands. There were three figures floating there, one with the appearance of half-Race half-a mountain, one half-Race half-first aid kit, and one half-Race half-cheetah.

"Whoa! What are those?" I asked, surprised by the creatures.

“The Charevo Fairies. The Charevo Emblem on our hands represents the elements of our Charevo Gene, and the fairies here represent them as well, or at least, that’s what Tel-E says.” Race explained as his fairies hovered around him before the one that looked like Race as a mountain, the Determination Fairy, floated in front of the speedster.

“To give up is to admit defeat. To not give up is to give what opposes you time to admit defeat.” The Determination Fairy informed Race in an idealistic manner.

“When you feel at your worst, the only thing you can feel is better.” The Improvement Fairy noted.

“Make yourself quicker, you run alone. Make others quicker, they go at your pace.” The Speed Fairy quickly added.

“Helping others is what helps yourself.” The Improvement Fairy concluded.

Those Charevo Fairies floated back into Race’s hand tattoos, the Charevo Emblem as it was known. What I found notable about what was spoken to Race was that the advice each Charevo Fairy provided was based on the element they represented. It seemed like if others have the Charevo Gene and can be given advice like that, the advice given must depend on our Charevo Elements.

“So I’m guessing those things aren’t gonna give us any backup, huh?” I inferred, having wanted some other form of assistance from those fairies.

“Well, we’d better go help our friends then.” Race mentioned, feeling more hopeful this time.

“Are you sure you’re up to it after last time?”

“... It’s time for me to think about being part of a team rather than worrying about how to run it.”

“So what’s the game plan?”

“I may not be able to fight Cold Miner directly, but you’re not the only one who’s been keeping an ability a secret.”

I didn’t hear it in his voice, but I felt like Race using the word “ability” should’ve been in quotes like that since he was alluding to my frown shocks, which was really just a weakness. But

he filled me in on a couple more things. If we were going to save the Neo Brigade, we had to work like a team, and that meant we had to know everything about each other.

After we talked, it was time for us to make things right. I wasn't gonna be burdened by secrets anymore. With that, we went back to the room where Cold Miner imprisoned the Brigade. Apparently, the machine with the tube holding the team was almost done charging, which would allow Cold Miner to freeze them all to the point where they could never be unfrozen, that is, if it wasn't going to make them succumb to hypothermia. Cold Miner was so eager to get to this point; we could see him singing a song to go with succeeding in his plot while his crew was all set to relax.

"Oh, I been diggin' down the coal mine. I don't know how far it'll go. But if I need to see if I'll survive it anymore, I'll just throw four frozen birds down that hole." Cold Miner sang as he poured some coffee for himself and his henchmen.

"That doesn't make any sense." Nator argued from inside the tube. "If the birds are frozen, how can they go into the mine before you?"

"Gee, I don't know. How can you be the heroes of Minor City if you can't keep me from freezing your city?"

"We'll find a way." Tel-E affirmed.

"I sincerely doubt it. I've frozen the city from inside the earth. It would take decades for it to melt. And judging by my machine, you only have a few minutes left."

"Just let us outta here and you'll have no minutes left!" Pyra grumbled.

"Hmph. You sure know how to talk to a gentleman." Cold Miner remarked as he then picked up two rocks, one brown and one black. "I'll tell you what. If you can guess which hand the brown rock is in, I'll let you go."

"Uh . . . that one right there?" Bendy said, pointing to Cold Miner's hand with the brown rock.

“Oh, so sorry. That’s just a clump of dirt.” Cold Miner laughed, crushing the brown rock into dirt. “Looks like I win, but thanks for playing.”

“Loser!” Race called from across the room.

“What? Who said that?”

Before any of those crooks could turn around, I grew my hair out to slam most of the Chill-dren into the wall. Cold Miner then looked our way and found the two of us by the door. As soon as he saw us, I kept a smile on my face this time, though I actually chose to answer his question by pointing to Race as if I was ratting him out. Although, I also wanted him to know Race wasn’t afraid of him.

“Heh. So, Race, the one chance you have to run here and you don’t run away.” Cold Miner commented with a smirk on his face.

“I’m not running from my mistakes anymore, Cold Miner. In fact, I’m not gonna run at all to get you.” Race insisted, standing still at the doorway with his arms crossed.

“He’s not doing what?” Nator incredulously asked.

“Fine by me. Chill-dren! Attack!” Cold Miner ordered.

Upon that command, the army of Chill-dren ran to us while the floor was still frozen. They were able to move just fine with their cleats, but didn’t move too fast to avoid slipping. However, this was where Race came in. Rather than run at them this time, the Brigade leader activated his secondary ability. I guess he hadn’t thought to use it while he was so energized from making himself fast.

Race demonstrated this ability by holding his arms out, and projecting a sonic wave of circles like what you’d see from an underwater telepath. That circular wave was directed at all the Chill-dren charging for us. Upon intangible contact with the Chill-dren, the waves made their legs move much faster. The way it worked was the speed wave was Race’s way of giving anyone and anything temporary super speed.

Once all the Chill-dren became forcibly speedy, they all moved too quickly to remain upright, and slipped on the ice. After

they went down, I took the time to grow my hair over most of them, wrapping it around the minions before I turned my hair into a set of chains, tying them up.

“I’m not just about making myself speedy.” Race insisted as my hair lifted the restrained Chill-dren.

Race then fired another speed wave at the chained Chill-dren while my hair still held them all chained up. This resulted in me throwing them forward as they went flying into several more Chill-dren at super high speeds.

“You okay if I just hang back?” Race asked me as I transformed back into Alex Specter.

“Don’t worry. You’re just here to make me look good.” I quipped.

After we established our fighting relationship, I used my ghost character to fly into the fray while Race projected a speed wave at me. With my enhanced flight speed, I managed to dodge all the ice pistol shots the Chill-dren threw at me. As their shots continued to miss me, they wound up hitting some of the other minions. This left about half the remaining unchained Chill-dren getting frozen.

As I flew around, Cold Miner took a few ice energy shots at me while I dodged them with ease. I then took that speed and flew right into the miner boss, slamming him down the room.

“What’s the matter, Race? Afraid to get your hands dirty like everyone else?” Cold Miner groaned.

“My hands are doin’ just fine over here, thank you.” Race replied, firing his speed wave at me again.

Turning his attention back to Race, Cold Miner shot a beam of ice energy from his pickaxe at the Brigade leader. While I dealt with more Chill-dren, I got another minion frozen before I kicked him down to Race, protecting the speedster from Cold Miner’s attack as he hid behind the Chill-dren popsicle. With Race safe, I went back to the remaining Chill-dren, knocking all of them out with my newfound speed. Within a minute or so, Cold Miner’s crew were either frozen, chained up, or unconscious.

Feeling proud of my work, I morphed back to normal, still with a smile on my face. However, with my attention on the defeated Chill-dren, Cold Miner instantly attacked from behind, projecting his ice energy, freezing me entirely.

"I am not letting any kids keep me from making everyone struggle in life like I did." Cold Miner asserted, walking to me.

Fortunately, I still had my smile as I was frozen so I avoided the potential electric shocks. So while I couldn't change my look in that state, Cold Miner raised his pickaxe in the air, about to land a stronger attack as I couldn't do anything.

Suddenly, I found the ice melt like I had been put in a microwave. As it turns out, Race had fired a speed wave at me, increasing the melting rate. Thanks to Race's assistance while he continued to hang back, I got my hair to extend out to Cold Miner's arms, stopping his swing just in time as the axe was inches from my head. I'm surprised my smile didn't drop at that point, but I managed to force him back.

However, as my hair had grabbed him, he used the strength from his pickaxe to grab my hair, pulling it along with me attached to it. In that moment of him holding my hair, he swung me back into a wall before throwing me into another side of the room. Upon impact, I became a bit dazed as you would when your skull rams into a steel wall. And as you would also do, I didn't have a smile on my face upon getting hurt. So with Cold Miner facing me, he kept me down by causing additional electrocution through my powers. I wasn't ready to fight back right away, but the Chill-dren boss readily prepared to freeze me one more time with his pickaxe.

"Ellie, look out!" Tel-E alerted me.

"Hey, ugly!" Race shouted from across the room.

As Cold Miner was ready to throw another attack at me, Race suddenly threw a rock at his head, much to the miner's annoyance. That got his attention for sure as he turned away from me.

"You'd better know how to tunnel out of Charevo Penitentiary." Race taunted the villain.

The Brigade leader tried his hand at making Cold Miner even madder by hurling another rock. This time, Race used his speed waves on the stone, turning into a bullet-like projectile, knocking the miner on his back after that rock struck him.

Not taking this lightly, Cold Miner fired his ice energy at the speedster who quickly hid behind the frozen minion from before. The ice villain was about to run to the Brigade leader himself and slam that minion out of the way with Race along with him, but I recovered fast enough and extended my hair out into a hard fist, punching Cold Miner and getting his attention back.

With that, he threw his pickaxe at me again. Before it could get to me though, I turned into the ghostly Alex Specter again to become intangible. This made the axe go right through my Specter body as it stuck to the wall behind me, though Cold Miner's powers that were connected to the axe allowed him to levitate the axe right back to him like a Norse God. With his weapon in hand, Cold Miner tried running at me again as I flew to the side, dodging him while he punched the wall instead, breaking a piece of it while I floated away from the miner.

"Ellie, his strength comes from the pickaxe! You gotta keep it from him!" Race informed me.

Taking that advice, I instantly utilized my Alex Specter ghost abilities to turn invisible. Cold Miner just started looking around.

"Grrr. Where are you?" Cold Miner growled as I floated next to him, staying out of sight.

"Yoink." I said as I snatched the pickaxe from him.

To keep the miner's offense capabilities down, and to show off the kind of powers I had access to, I used Alex Specter's green Ecto-Energy power, which was just like Major Lee's hand energy, and took a shot at the pickaxe. This wound up creating an energy field surrounding the weapon that gave Cold Miner his strength, leaving him super weaponless.

This was something to go against him, but he wasn't stopping. After losing his axe, Cold Miner angrily tried throwing ice beams from his hands at me again while I dodged them all with

my flight and intangibility before I landed in front of him. When I was on my feet, Cold Miner kept the ice attacks coming as his abilities gave him new weapons. His ice powers seemed to grow what looked like Katana swords made of ice that formed in his hands.

This was getting strange and cool how he easily got these swords ready, but I couldn't stop and stare then, for he instantly swung his swords at me. However, while he wasn't fighting him directly, Race projected his speed waves at me again, allowing me to dodge the sword swings at super speed like the Brigade leader would have.

"Gee, you lose a pickaxe and suddenly you go from Cold Miner to Samur-ice?" I quipped.

"Don't make me skewer you!" Cold Miner growled, taking another swing at me.

I evaded that last attack before I went back to the air to stay away from him further. Realizing the swords weren't going to help, Cold Miner displayed his abilities again as if to impress me by shooting his energy at the floor. I knew the floor was already frozen, so I thought that move seemed pretty pointless. But right when I thought that, a piece of the floor ascended right at me.

As I flew out of the way, upon further inspection, Cold Miner had created icy stalagmites to form on the floor to rise up and stab me from below. He kept shooting at the floor, forcing new giant icicle stalagmites to form below me and shoot up at my position. I had to fly around to dodge every icicle that popped up.

This was surprising at first, but rather than let this erase my smile, I just started to find the whole thing fun. I was flying around to annoy Cold Miner who kept trying to get me, but continued to miss.

After his many attempts to get those icicles to stop me, I just threw Alex Specter's energy at him, getting a couple good hits. However, he could still defend from that by using his powers to form an icy shield around himself, which my energy couldn't break through.

"Look who's hiding now." I commented.

“Don’t worry. You’re gonna be as cold as a real ghost soon enough.” Cold Miner said with confidence.

“Ellie, fly into him! And don’t break the ice!” Race instructed me as I chose to do as he said.

“Heh. This should be good.” Cold Miner laughed.

I wasn’t sure what Race was getting at, but I just had to trust him on this. Following his guidance, I flew to Cold Miner at full speed. The Chill-dren commander just stood there behind his shield, just certain I’d do nothing with my character. But after I took off, I found yet another round of circles from a speed wave coming. I was expecting to get hit by it, which would send me flying into the shield like the speed was supposed to break it. Of course, I was skeptical of that.

Luckily, that wasn’t what Race was going for. Rather than go for me, he aimed at Cold Miner’s ice shield, instantly melting it like he did with me earlier. The shield vanished within a second, right as I reached him. With him defenseless, I punched him with the momentum of my flight, sending him into a wall. After that hit, Cold Miner collapsed, ready to pass out.

“You’ve been creamed, ice boy.” I declared, standing over him.

“Don’t celebrate yet. In about ten seconds, we’re serving four fresh popsicles.” Cold Miner assured me.

Still with his plan to gloat for fresh in our minds, Cold Miner pointed to his machine trapping the Neo Brigade. As we focused on the gauge on the end of it, we could see his device had just finished charging, ready to permanently freeze them.

“Ellie, you gotta get ‘em out!” Race told me.

Still in my Alex Specter form, I flew to the capsule as the machine started beeping, about to activate. I didn’t know what the latency delay was between the activation and flash freezing was, so I had no clue how much time I had. I was racing against a randomly set clock.

After Race and I got them captured when he led them there and we failed to stop Cold Miner the first time, he and I would have never forgiven ourselves if we lost them. I knew that I

would be losing four potential friends, leaving me closer to no one at that point. Those I was working to impress, I couldn't let them go like this.

But I didn't consider any of this. My thoughts were only with Race and what he had to lose. He was their real friend. He was the one who was tasked with the pressure of leading a team. He was the one who was expected to avoid this type of trouble. I could already get a sense of how quickly he was to blame himself for anything that goes wrong. I would've been there with him, but he was the one who had all the responsibility. Nobody knew me, but Race could've received all the blame for this.

But I couldn't let that happen. Not to him. Not to the first person who trusted me in Minor City. Not to the person who introduced me to so many awesome people. Not to the first new friend I made in this city who introduced me to some awesome people. And the lives of the rest of the Neo Brigade he worked with meant just as much.

And as I took flight, I could feel Race's similar urge to save them as well, for he knew he couldn't get there in time himself because of the ice. So, instead, he shot his speed waves at me while I flew to the capsule. With the extra velocity, I turned intangible to get through the tube as I could feel the temperature drop and see everything turn to blue and white once I entered. I didn't know if I could get anyone out, so I just grabbed hold of all four members of the Neo Brigade.

With Race's generous speed gift, I intangibly moved them all to the edge of the capsule as I could feel a sudden decrease in speed as the tube became flash frozen. I just closed my eyes and prayed I could get them out in time. Before I knew it, my speed had stopped, and I wasn't moving anywhere.

My eyes closed, I was ready to spend the rest of my life frozen with the Brigade. But, to my surprise, my eyes opened. And, as luck would have it, I was looking at a frozen tube from the outside with everyone who had been imprisoned. We all made it out. I saved them! Race and I saved them.

"Woo! Way to go Neo!" Bendy celebrated, high fiving me.

"Alright! Not bad." Nator added.

"Well done, Ellie." Tel-E commended me.

"Eh, not terrible." Pyra mumbled as Race slowly made his way over to us.

"Yeah, way to pull through. You see, guys? And you all thought I was crazy to bring her on board." Race commented. I was flattered to hear this, but he was the real hero in my eyes.

"I hate to break up the reunion." Cold Miner interrupted as we all turned to see him holding a bomb. It basically looked like a pack of dynamite with a clock on it. "But I'm not finished with you yet. Surely, you didn't think a guy who worked his whole life in the mines wouldn't use any dynamite. Say good night, kids."

"I don't think so." Race replied.

In a last ditch effort, Cold Miner turned on the time bomb as it was set for ten seconds. He was ready to throw it at us, but, with newfound confidence in his contributions to the team, Race readily fired another speed wave at Cold Miner, and also the bomb. While there wasn't any quick movement, the speed of the bomb's countdown increased instead. With the power of Race, the timer went from ten seconds to zero seconds in less than one second.

The next thing we saw was a massive explosion on the other side of the room. We were all okay, and so was Cold Miner due to his immunity to heat. But the resulting shockwave was too close and left him stunned for a while, though he was still on his feet after that.

"So who wants the last shot?" Race asked the team.

"Actually, I think you earned this one." I admitted as I grew my hair out to grab Race. "But first, I think we should take Bendy's advice."

I didn't even have to ask the Brigade leader his thoughts on this. He was eager to take this as I grew my hair out to grab hold of him. As I positioned him, I then swung him back and launched him forward. Now, this wasn't to hurt him. It was to have him going at a good speed as payback for helping me save the Brigade.

With him moving in the air at that velocity, he held his foot out and landed one good kick on Cold Miner. Just one more blow was all it took as the miner finally collapsed, falling unconscious. Race got up and had nothing but a smile from seeing his foe defeated.

"You can tell Don Crimel I said thanks." Race remarked, looking down at the villain.

"Way to go, Race. I knew you'd come back." Bendy told the speedster.

"No you didn't. You were crying on my shoulder the whole time saying they're not coming back and you'll never get to crash your motorcycle again." Pyra clarified.

"Alright, well, before we all celebrate, aren't we forgetting the thing that made us come down here?" Nator reminded us, pointing to a video screen that showed the city still covered in ice.

"Relax. I'm sure Race can melt it pretty quickly." I suggested.

"You think so?" Race asked.

"Well, if Cold Miner's pickaxe froze everything when it hit the earth from down here, why couldn't you . . . you know."

The goal was to force Cold Miner to undo the freezing of Minor City, but that was never going to be easy. But Race had power that could actually help people besides himself. Looking to help others like he wanted to, Race stood where Cold Miner was when he used his pickaxe to freeze part of the earth. He then held out his hand and projected one final round of speed waves at the earth.

While Race concentrated on putting his abilities to work, and, as he kept it up, we found the area around us slowly becoming unfrozen. It was working! And after a few minutes of this, we looked to the video screen showing Minor City. And, to our good fortune, it was gradually losing its frosty appearance with its ice gradually melting. The roads were clearing, building exteriors were spilling waterfalls of melted snow. The longer Race did his thing, the quicker the city went back to normal. Within a

few minutes, Race had successfully rid Minor City of all of Cold Miner's doings.

As soon as everything looked right, me and the Brigade left Cold Miner's lair and returned to the Neo Brigade HQ. But, this time, I was led through that door Bendy and Nator were trying to keep me out of. The Chief had called everyone into the Brigade's office, which was on the other end of the hall connecting the Neo Brigade HQ and police station through that door.

Once I got there, it looked just like a regular office with a table in the middle of the room and desks facing the walls of the room's perimeter along with folders stapled to the wall near the door. Not very exciting for a place superheroes worked, but it was still pretty cool to be somewhere so official.

In the office of the police station for the Brigade, the Chief was there waiting for us as he then made everyone in the team line up before calling Race forward. With a smile on his face, the Chief then put a medal around his son's neck with pride.

"And for leading your team to capture a wanted villain and restoring the traffic in Minor City to its more bearable state, I am pleased to award you the medal of courage . . ." The Chief proudly stated as he gave his son the medal before he took a few other items out of a box. ". . . In addition to this new box of pens, this bus pass, this five dollar gift card to Barry Burger's, and finally, this baseball bat autographed by Extreme City slugger Roddy 'Runaway' Richards."

"Thanks, Dad. But . . . I don't deserve this." Race admitted, turning to his team who were standing behind him. "Listen, guys, I know I haven't made the best decisions. But I just want you to know I'm sorry. I should've listened to you more than that bogus informant. Is there any chance you can forgive me?"

"Of course, Race. You'll always be our leader." Tel-E answered.

"Yeah, I guess we're fine." Pyra mumbled.

"Sure. I mean, you did stop Cold Miner." Nator added.

"Yeah, it's all good. Dibs on the bat!" Bendy shouted, snatching the autographed bat from Race's hands.

"Alright. Very good. Now, everyone get to work on your reports! We've had many people to arrest and I need individual contributions recorded and validated!" The Chief ordered the team.

The Brigade proceeded to go to their desks as they then filled out those damage reports like the ones Race gave to the Chief earlier with Bendy placing his new bat on top of the shelf over his desk.

"See, Race? People respect you after all." I acknowledged.

"Thanks, Ellie. Now . . . you know, we just got back Bendy's old communicator Cold Miner used to manipulate me. I trusted two people on faith today, and one of them tried to destroy me and my team with this thing. I think you should have it." Race offered as he handed me the communicator.

"You mean . . ."

"How would you like an official full-time position on the Neo Brigade?"

"Oh my God! You want me to stay with you guys? Oh yeah! Thank you!" I shrieked in excitement.

"Wait. Hold on. Lemme check with my team first."

I could see the rest of the Brigade visibly think about whether I should join them. They sort of mumbled to themselves as they then looked at one another before looking back at me.

"Whaddaya think, guys?" Race asked.

"Invite the girl who lied to us about her powers? Sure. That'll end well." Pyra commented with minimal optimism.

"Then again, she did save us." Tel-E argued.

"And it's not like being forced to smile is YOUR thing, Pyra." Bendy added.

"Ha! That would fry her faster than her flames." Nator laughed.

"Look, I know I failed to . . . disclose information. But I want all the best for this city that you want. And I promise to be honest with you guys and help however I can from now on. You have my word." I vowed.

To further converse on this, they all huddled up to whisper to each other for a few seconds before getting back to Race and I.

"Well, some of us want to see if she can impress us further, but we think she'll fit in well." Tel-E replied.

"Just for the record, I still think having her here is a bad idea. But if everyone else is fine with her, then . . . she's in." Pyra reluctantly accepted with a sigh at the end.

"Sounds like you're in." Race concluded to me.

"Woo! I swear, you will not regret this!" I assured everyone.

"Tel-E, you can read minds. Is she lying?" Pyra inquired the telepath.

"Okay, hold the phone. Before I can allow you membership to this group, you need to follow the proper protocol just like everyone else." The Chief informed me as he took some papers out of his briefcase and put them on his clipboard and began writing. "Alright, name?"

"Dad, does this have to be right now?" Race questioned.

"Son, if you're instating people left and right into your squad without me having any file on him or her, you're only sabotaging the police and therefore aiding the enemy. Name?"

"Uh, Ellie Belinda Bellavitz." I answered.

"Eye color?"

"Blue."

"Height?"

"Five-seven."

"Powers?"

"Oh, well, I can control my hair to grow and form solid objects. I can transform into many female TV, movie, or video game characters. Oh! I can alter my clothes at will." I told the Chief, giving him a demonstration of the last one. I then looked at the Brigade who just appeared passive before realizing I had to clear something up. "And . . . I also have a weakness where if someone looks at me and I'm not smiling, I get electrocuted."

"Hero name?"

"Say that again?"

“Hero name. Your hero name! Your form of identification used specifically for serving the city so as not to conflict with your normal identity among those familiar with you prior to becoming an official super servant of Minor City.” The Chief elaborated.

“Well, that sounds complicated.” Pyra commented.

“Tell me about it. He didn't even let me have a name. He said my name sounded abnormal enough.” Tel-E added.

“Uh, well . . . actually, you know, I've never really thought of having a superhero name.” I admitted, believe it or not, not kidding.

“No name, then you'll have to be assigned one. Let's see. You have powers related to your hair, your clothes, and fictional women. Plus there's that part where you're always smiling. Alright. Your name will be . . . Beauty.” The Chief concluded as he looked at what he wrote down on his clipboard.

“What?”

“Beauty. That's your name. That or 'Camera Girl'. Which do you prefer?”

“Of those two, Beauty, I guess. But . . .”

“Don't you argue with me! You will be addressed as Beauty and that's final!” The Chief insisted.

“Oh, but I hate that name. It's not me. Come on. Lemme have something else. Bendy called me Hairpiece earlier. Can I have that?” I requested.

“No! The decision's been made.”

Ugh. Really? Beauty? Talk about a lousy name. The one part about me that I spent the least amount of time talking about and having fun with, and it's my looks. That's not me. Then again, I remembered the Charevo Gene and those three elements representing their Behavior, Mentality, and Identification that give a person their powers, and Tel-E said mine were Fiction, Imagination, and Femininity. Gee, which one represented the element about how people see me? The one that I wouldn't have branded me with the name Beauty if it was something different? All I could think was, “Why did I tell the Chief my weakness? I didn't mislead HIM into danger for keeping secrets.”

As I thought about the femininity element, I already had a feeling it had a hand in providing my hair powers as well as my seldom displayed wardrobe altering ability, which was pretty cool. But then there were my character transformations, which were limited to only female characters. And then the one creeping in the back of my head: the electric shocks from not smiling.

I almost wanted to look at my Charevo Emblem and say to the Fiction unicorn and Imagination dragon marks, "I love you, I love you . . ." and then just say to the Femininity princess "I DON'T love you!" But I thought about it and realized getting mad wouldn't help, especially not with people looking at me. I don't know. I guess I was just gonna have to make this work. I knew there was no way of getting rid of that smiling weakness, so if I was gonna force myself to get used to that, I could force myself to accept the name Beauty, whether I wanted to or not. Just smile like a nice girl. That was my job. I know I naturally look happy most of the time, and I do like to smile, but only on my terms.

I could rant some more, but while I started yelling inside my own head as I hid my frustration behind another fake smile, the Chief took out a giant stack of paper.

"Now, I'll have to get you a desk for this office so you can do today's report tomorrow. But before that, you'll also have to read and fill out this eighty-four page police obligation agreement. Make sure you sign every page by oh-five-hundred tomorrow when you report for your physical. And don't think you can get out of it. We're very observant during the urine tests." The Chief informed me as he then walked away.

"Wait. Why do I have to . . ." I uttered as I looked at everything I had to read.

"Welcome to Chief Trotterberg's Neo Brigade, Beauty." Race said, putting his hand on my shoulder while I just sighed.

Just keep smiling, Ellie. Just keep smiling. I knew there was a lot to anticipate looking unhappy about. But as I looked at Race next to me, I didn't have to worry about smiling. I may have had one less friend as I got to the city, but a new one was right there to make it all better. And maybe four more on the way, perhaps. It

didn't start so well for all of them, but, like things are with this superhero life, sometimes things happen you just don't expect.

Optional Dialogue

Optional Dialogue 1

"Quick! The girl! Blast her!" One of the Chill-dren ordered as someone took a shot at Pyra who instantly melted any ice created.

"Well, at least your aim is good. Aaaaand I've run out of nice things to say." Pyra remarked, acknowledging the flaw in that attack.

"Oh man, this would be the worst commercial ever for one of those guns." Bendy laughed.

"Are you tired of girls with the power of heat making your freeze attacks ineffective? Well, too bad. That's physics." Pyra quipped in a dry manner as she returned fire.

"But wait! There's more!"

"No. This bit's done."

"So, Ellie, you enjoying the melee?" Tel-E inquired.

"This is my favorite city ever." I replied.

"Gloom City is just down the road and THIS is your favorite city?" Bendy asked, confused.

"Ellie, did you ever fight any villains in your hometown?" Race queried me.

"Nope. Virtually crime free." I informed the speedster.

"Oh man. Ellie, can we switch cities, please?"

"Ellie, do you think you could not smile so much? We need to try and be taken as seriously as we can." Nator requested.

"Don't be silly, Nator. She's not going to hurt any of us just by smiling." Tel-E argued.

"Hey, don't go making assumptions, Tel-E. We can't show any weakness in front of Cold Miner."

"We're only fighting his henchmen. Cold Miner's not even here. And how is putting on a smile in battle weakness? If anything, it shows confidence and could possibly hinder the opponent from knowing they're not instilling any fear in us."

"There's being confident and then there's just looking like a joke. Looking tough with a good reputation is preferable to smiling."

"What reputation? We're a bunch of teens with superpowers. And, again, these are just henchmen. Ellie can have some fun with this if she wants."

"Too much fun leads to underestimating the opponent. Therefore, all that should be limited."

"Uh, do I get any say in this?" I interjected.

"At least this is one of those times where a guy wants a girl to NOT smile." Pyra mentioned.

"Whoa! How many minions does this Cold Miner guy have?" I asked.

"I don't know. How many would you like?" Pyra muttered.

"Don't answer that, Ellie." Tel-E interjected.

"This isn't Whack-O-Mole, you know."

"Moles? Miners? Pretty close, though." I noted as Pyra sighed.

"Beaten bad guys comin' through!" Bendy hollered, hitting several minions near Race.

"Whoa! Careful, Bendy!" Race cried.

"Are you trying to get us killed?" Nator scolded Bendy.

"Why do I get the feeling we're going to ask him this again later?" Tel-E wondered out loud.

"Woo! This is great! Hardly breaking a sweat over here." I proudly announced.

"And if any of the henchmen Race fought are named 'Sweat', Race can say the same thing." Pyra remarked.

"Hey, cut me some slack. I didn't bring ice skates for this thing." Race argued.

"Dude, I've seen you skate. I don't think you'd be tripping any less." Bendy mentioned.

"Bam! Got another one!" I exclaimed excitedly after another attack.

"Brilliant work, Ellie." Tel-E complimented me.

"Thanks for all the help so far. Your powers are incredible." Race told me as he still struggled to fight.

"My thanks to you for bringing me along." I said, still in battle.

"Okay, Race, how 'bout you compliment her again? This time, just know you don't get credit for all the good things she does." Nator suggested.

"What? I . . . I wasn't gonna take any credit for her success." Race claimed.

"Good. 'Cause you know we're all set to blame you for her potential failures." Pyra noted.

"Oh, well, as long as I know ahead of time." Race sarcastically muttered, still sounding anxious.

"Oh geez. Is there any end to these guys?" Race asked, exhausted.

"Just be patient, Speedy. Why don't you just wait outside and we'll tell you when we're done." Pyra suggested.

"Dibs on leader until Race gets back!" Bendy announced.

"Ugh. Every time he's first." Nator mumbled.

