

FUTURE
HERO
RACE TO FIRE MOUNTAIN

REMI BLACKWOOD

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Scholastic Inc.

Special thanks to Chiemeka Nicely and Jasmine Richards

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ISBN 978-1-338-79032-0

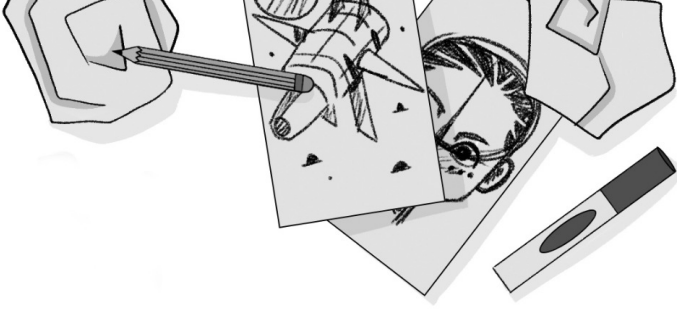
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 22 23 24 25 26

Printed in the U.S.A. 37

First edition, August 2022

Book design by Aimee Stewart and Omou Barry



CHAPTER ONE

You Live in the Real World

Jarell raced up the five flights of stairs to his apartment, but he couldn't escape the memory of his classmates' laughter. Or his teacher's very angry face.

"Here we are again, Jarell," Mr. Mordi had said. "The whole class has followed directions, except for you!" The teacher crossed his arms. "Do tell us why this drawing of yours is more important than you learning algebra. What makes you so special?"

Jarell's cheeks had burned with embarrassment as he stood there in front of the class. Everyone was laughing at him, except Raheem, his desk mate. Raheem just looked really sorry for him. The pity hurt worse.

Jarell had stared down at the drawing clutched in his sweaty hands. He wished he could escape into it, even though it was a battle scene between an angry-looking sorcerer and a heroic goddess with lightning coming from her eyes. The same goddess he had drawn so many times.

Jarell pushed away the memory as he reached the top of the stairwell and stumbled onto the open-air walkway. He rubbed at his eyes, which felt wet and hot. At least his parents were on late-shift and wouldn't be home. They could always tell when he was upset. They'd make him tell them what happened and then he would have to admit that he'd been drawing in Math. Mom would not be impressed.

The spicy smell of brown stew chicken

wafted out from under one of the doors and made Jarell's stomach rumble. He could hear the calls of kids playing in the gardens below over the din of the nearby traffic. They were playing soccer *as usual*. Jarell wouldn't be joining them. His brother, Lucas, had got all the athletic talent. All Jarell could do was draw. *Electric-flame or lava-flow red?* For the first time since Mr. Mordi's class, Jarell let himself smile. The picture that had got him into trouble wasn't finished. Lava-flow red would be perfect for the evil sorcerer's eyes and electric-flame red would show off the tech in the glowing metal glove that covered his wrist.

Jarell felt his shoulders relax. Thinking about drawing was almost as calming as actually drawing. He always drew the same futuristic world of towering buildings and powerful warriors. And then there was the girl with the spear of light. Even he didn't know where the images came from. Ever since he was little, he had had the urge to draw them. Thankfully he'd improved with practice.

Jarell's fingers itched for his best markers. Once he had them, everything else would just fade away. Hopefully his brother would be out with his friends as well. Jarell liked it best when he had the apartment to himself. He could take his time drawing without Lucas telling him he was focusing on the wrong things in life.

Jarell broke into a jog and stopped by the emerald-green front door. He'd helped Mom choose the shade. He rummaged in his pocket for his key.

"No, no, no," Jarell muttered. He patted himself down. The key wasn't there. His throat tightened as he turned out wrappers and empty pen lids onto the doormat. He checked his other pockets, then the empty pocket once more. Not there. He'd lost yet another key. He shook his head, all of a sudden hoping his brother was home.

Jarell pushed his shoulders back, lifted the door knocker, and banged it in a one-two, then three-four, rhythm.

"Come on, Lucas, please be in," Jarell muttered. His school bag dug into his shoulders, heavy with homework. He knocked again. Still nothing. Jarell sighed, resting his forehead against the cool door. His parents were going to be so mad if they found him sitting out on the doorstep because he'd lost another key.

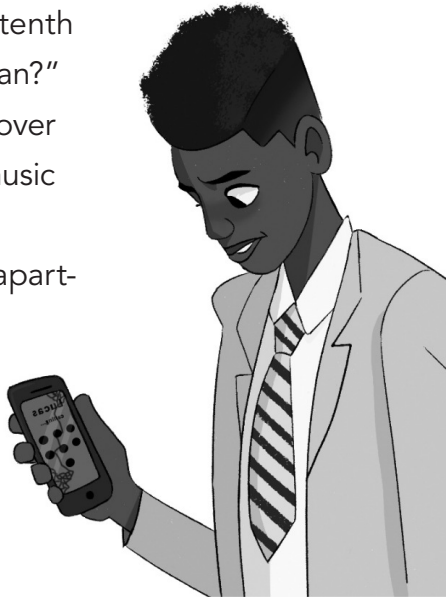
He fished his battered phone out of his bag. The crack on the screen snaked across the picture of his brother's face as he hit the call button.

Lucas answered on the tenth ring. "What's up, little man?" His brother was shouting over the thumping beat of loud music on his end.

"I need to get into the apartment," Jarell explained.

"I can't hear you," Lucas yelled.

"Lucas, come home and let me in," Jarell shouted.



He could hear the sound of laughing even over the noise, then the music died away. "Come on, guys, stop it. He's my little brother," Jarell heard his brother say, his voice a bit muffled. "Hey, Jarell. Can you hear me? What's up?"

"I've lost my key," Jarell said, just wanting the call to be over.

"I got plans, baby brother. I can't just drop them every time you lose a key." Lucas sighed. "Remember what Dad said? You've got to stop daydreaming. You live in the real world, not in that pretend dream one you're always drawing."

That was easy for Lucas to say. He had it all figured out. He had the right friends. He wore the right clothes. He fit in, effortlessly. Jarell couldn't help wishing, for the millionth time, that he were as cool as Lucas. But something about him always felt awkward and out of place—except when he was drawing. Then it was just him and his special world of amazing technology, swirling magic, and magnificent

warriors. It made him feel like he had a purpose in a way that even playing *Sahrain Battle* on the console didn't.

Lucas tutted in annoyance. "Jarell, I just asked you a question. Are you even gonna answer?"

"Huh? Um—I . . ." Jarell trailed off as movement down the walkway caught his eye. Their neighbor from two doors down, Mr. Campbell, had stuck his head out the door and was looking his way. If he stayed here any longer, his elderly neighbor would want to tell him everything that he thought was wrong with the world, starting with Jarell and his brother.

"Okay, I get it, Lucas," Jarell replied. "Can you get home soon?"

Lucas sighed. "I'll talk to Sticks and Dashon. Call you back."

"But what am I supposed to do until then?" Jarell asked. There was no answer. Lucas had hung up.

Mr. Campbell had stepped onto the walkway. Jarell kept the phone to his ear and

pretended he was still talking to his brother.

"Yup, meet you downstairs," he said into the phone as he walked past the old man.

As soon as he was out of sight, Jarell shrugged off his bag and stuffed his phone back inside it. He slumped down on the concrete steps of the stairwell, then rummaged inside the backpack for his workbook. Perhaps he should do his homework? His fingers touched the cool metal surface of his pencil case, and he immediately had a better idea. He didn't have his special markers, but he could add some shading to the drawing of the goddess and the sorcerer. *Ten minutes*, he told himself. Just enough time to make him feel himself again, to feel in control of something.

Jarell dumped his textbooks on the step. He pulled out the folder he kept his drawings in but didn't open it. Sitting here on the stairs, he suddenly felt so lonely that even drawing wasn't going to fix it.

"But I'm not alone," Jarell murmured. *Maybe I'll go to the barbershop and see if*

Omari's in. His cousin always knew how to cheer him up and he'd definitely want to see Jarell's newest drawing. Jarell hadn't seen his cousin for ages, not since that flood had ruined his barbershop and he'd started on fixing it up again. Dad had said they'd all be going to the grand reopening on Saturday.

Jarell slid the folder into the bag, then zipped it up and jumped to his feet. He then raced down the stairs and out onto the street before taking the shortcut down a narrow alley to Fades, the best barbershop this side of the river (at least Jarell thought so). Stepping inside the barbershop was always like stepping into another world. People talked about everything there. Sports. Politics. And of course anything that was going down in the neighborhood. And his cousin Omari treated everyone special, including Jarell.

As he crossed the road, Jarell could see Omari. His cousin was inside the shop, peeling off the newspaper that had been covering the windows for the last four weeks. Jarell

had missed the music and banter of the barber-shop. And there was nothing like a sharp shape up. When Jarell got out of that chair and checked himself in the mirror, he always felt ten times taller.

Jarell tapped on the glass and his cousin came out of the shop, a huge smile on his face.

“Hey, cuz!” Omari bumped fists with Jarell and then slung an arm over his shoulder. “What’s good, Jarell?” he asked.

“Just checking in, cuz,” Jarell replied, and hated that he could hear a whisper of a crack in his voice.

“Your day’s been that bad—huh?” Omari scrunched up the newspaper in his hand.

“Got to wait for Lucas to get home,” Jarell explained.

“Lost your key again?” Omari smiled before lobbing the ball of newspaper into a nearby bin.

Jarell nodded.

“Anything else bugging you?”

Jarell shrugged. He knew he could tell

Omari anything, but he felt like a pen that had dried up. He didn't want to go over what had happened in class again. He wanted something to take his mind off it. "Can I see what you've done with Fades?"

Omari crossed his arms. "I was hoping to surprise everyone when we reopened officially. That includes you."

"You'll have people lining up from here to the Shard," Jarell replied. "I want to see it while it's all fresh. I promise I won't give away anything before you open."

Omari rubbed the edges of his beard. "Okay. I'll let you see. Follow me."