

WHEN LIGHTNING STRIKES



next
step

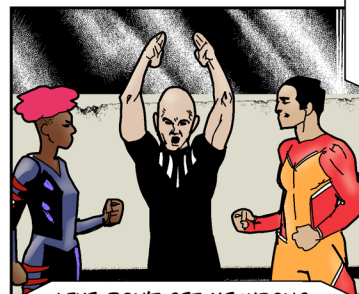
SOMETIME IN THE SUMMER...

BEEP!

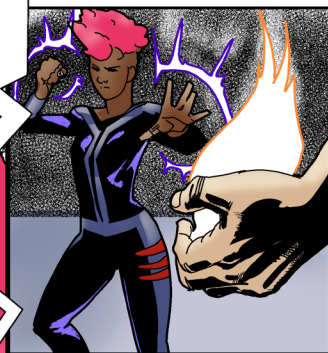
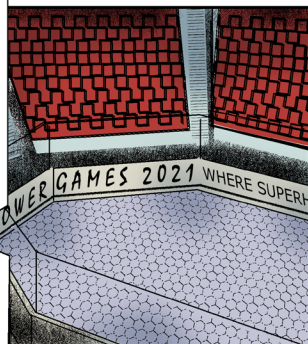
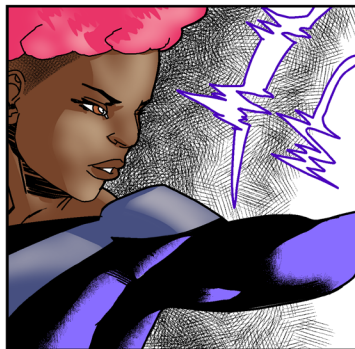
HEY KARA! IT'S JUN.
HOPE REGISTRATION WENT
OKAY AFTER I DROPPED YOU
OFF. I HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO
WATCH THE TOURNAMENT YET, 'CAUSE
I'M STILL DRIVING, SO **DON'T LOSE
UNTIL I GET HOME!** I MEAN, DON'T
LOSE IN GENERAL EITHER! THE PRIZE
IS A FULL RIDE TO THE IQHAWA
SCHOOL OF SUPERHEROES AT
CRESCENT CITY UNIVERSITY, RIGHT?
YOU'LL BE SAVING THE WORLD IN NO
TIME! YOU GOT THIS, HAHA!

ALSO, UM... JUST A HEADS UP...
I THINK IZZY MAY HAVE LET SLIP TO
NIKO THAT YOUR PARENTS DON'T KNOW
THAT YOU'RE IN THE TOURNAMENT
THIS YEAR. SHE TEXTED ME SAYING
HE LEFT THE HOUSE LOOKING SMUG,
SO YOU'D BETTER WATCH OUT. I'M NOT
SURE IF HE'LL ACTUALLY FOLLOW
THROUGH, THOUGH, SO DON'T, LIKE,
FREAK OUT OR ANYTHING!

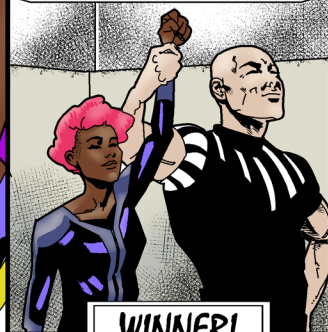
<YOU HAVE ONE NEW VOICEMAIL. PLEASE
PRESS 1 TO HEAR THE MESSAGE.>



LIKE, DON'T GET ME WRONG,
NIKO'S PRETTY, UH, UPTIGHT, BUT EVEN
HE'S NOT THAT EVIL. AND YOU USED
TO BE FRIENDS, RIGHT?

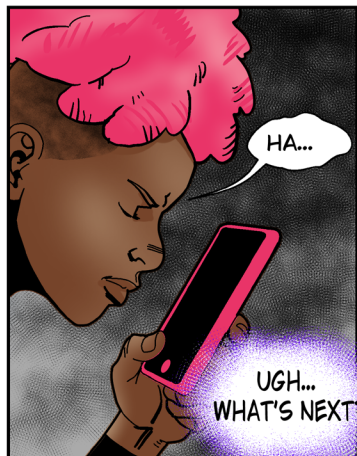


ANYWAYS, I'M SURE IT'LL BE
FINE. I MEAN, HE'S KNOWN THAT YOU
HAVE SICKLE CELL SINCE LAST YEAR
AND HE HASN'T TOLD ANYONE ELSE,
HAS HE?



WINNER!
KARA JACKSON

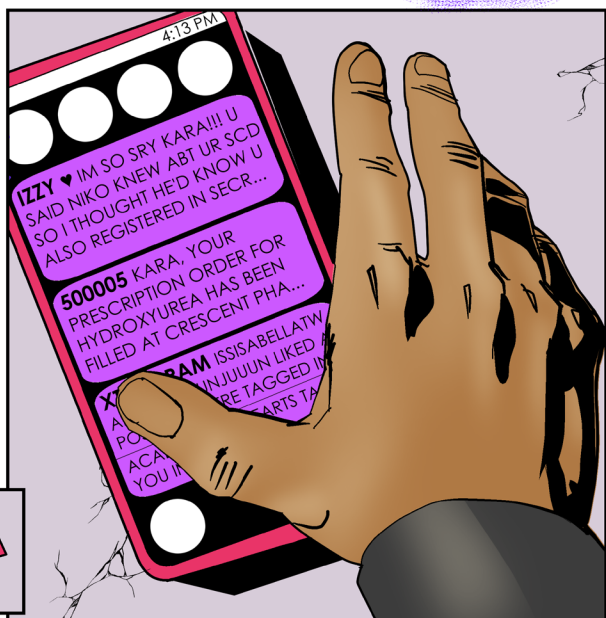
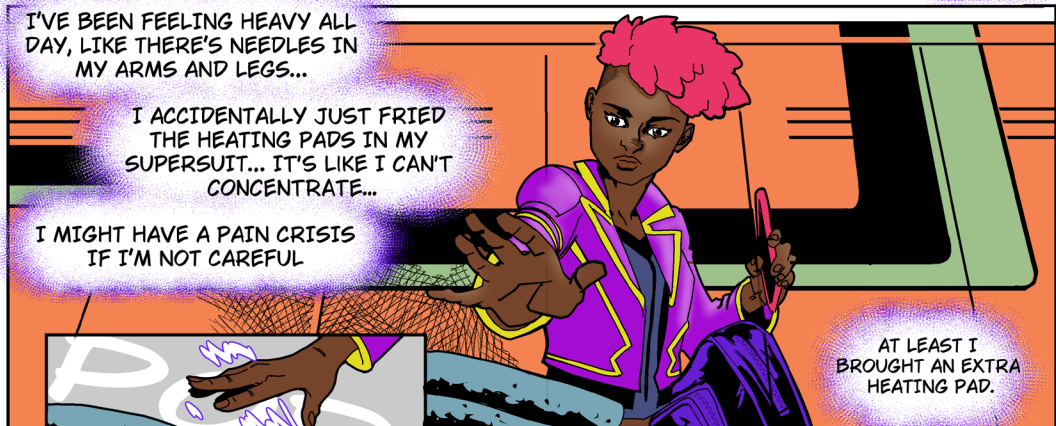
OK, I'M PULLING INTO THE DRIVEWAY NOW. YOU'D BETTER BE ON THAT TV SCREEN WHEN I GET IN! YOU GOT THIS!

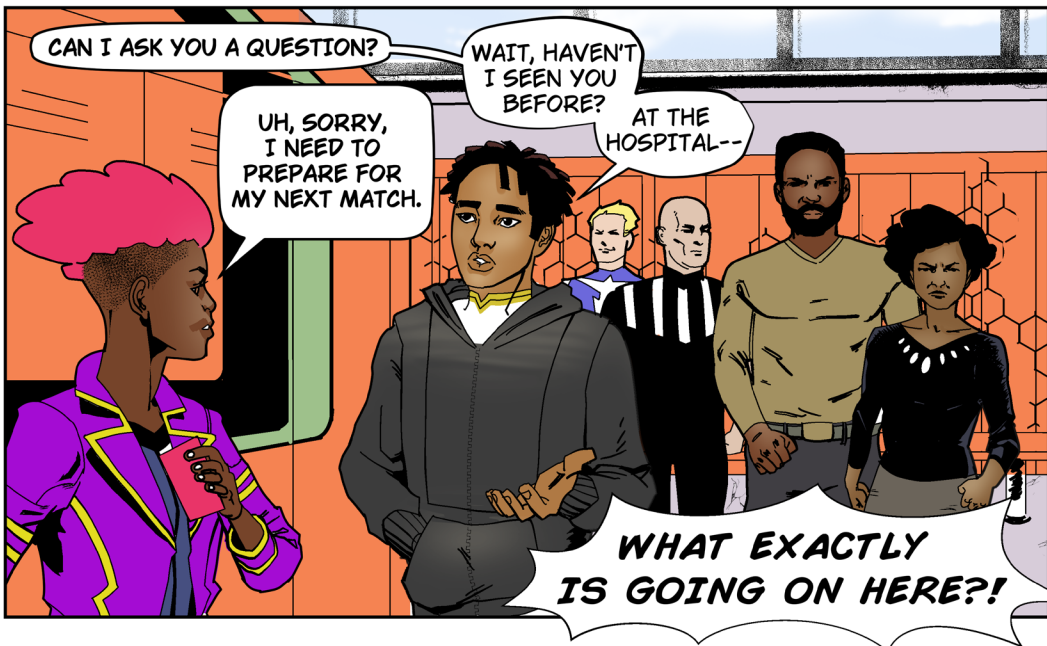
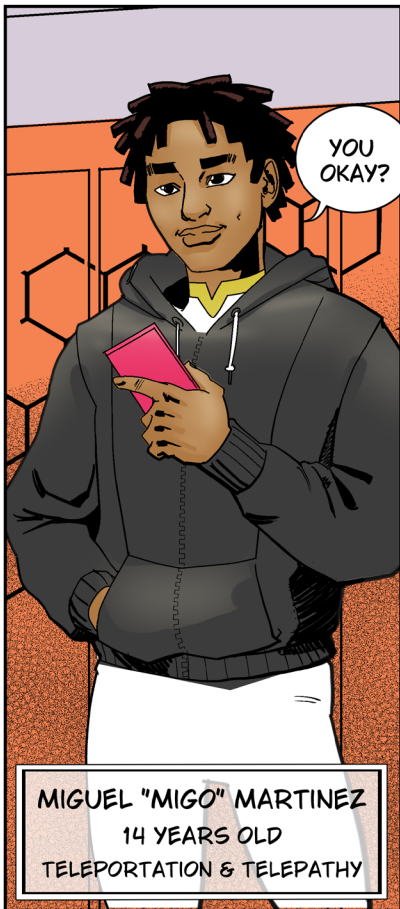


I'VE BEEN FEELING HEAVY ALL DAY, LIKE THERE'S NEEDLES IN MY ARMS AND LEGS...

I ACCIDENTALLY JUST FRIED THE HEATING PADS IN MY SUPERSUIT... IT'S LIKE I CAN'T CONCENTRATE...

I MIGHT HAVE A PAIN CRISIS IF I'M NOT CAREFUL







MOM!

DAD!

MOM,
I CAN
EXPLAIN--

I'M SO DISAPPOINTED
IN YOU, KARA. HOW LONG HAVE YOU
BEEN LYING TO US? WHO MODIFIED
YOUR SUIT? ARE THESE
HEATING PADS?

I-I MADE IT, MOM - I WANTED
SOMETHING TO HELP ME KEEP
AHEAD OF CRISES AND--

THEY'RE BROKEN!

I WAS BEING RESPONSIBLE! I EVEN
BROUGHT EXTRAS, JUST IN CASE!

THAT'S BROKEN, TOO!

IF YOU NEED HEATING PADS
TO KEEP FIGHTING, SHOULD
YOU EVEN BE PARTICIPATING?
ARE YOU IN PAIN RIGHT NOW?

I'M FINE, DAD--

MISS JACKSON,
WE WANTED TO DISCUSS YOUR
ELIGIBILITY FOR THE GAMES,
GIVEN YOUR...

ILLNESS.

FOR SAFETY
REASONS--

WHAT?!

I CAN'T
BELIEVE YOU,
NIKO!

YOU TOLD THEM?
YOU SOLD ME
OUT!

YOU SERIOUSLY JUST DISCLOSED
MY PERSONAL MEDICAL INFORMATION?
TO COMPLETE STRANGERS?



HEY, I MEAN... WOULDN'T WANT
YOU TO GET HURT, NOW, RIGHT?
IT'S FOR YOUR OWN GOOD.

RIGHT,
RIGHT.

NOT LIKE
WE'RE UP
AGAINST
EACH OTHER
IN THE NEXT
ROUND OR
ANYTHING.

HUH? UH...
I DIDN'T--

MISS JACKSON--

"GIVEN THE CONCERNS FOR YOUR SAFETY, WE THINK IT WOULD BE BEST FOR YOU TO DROP OUT OF THE POWER GAMES THIS YEAR."

MAYBE THEY'RE RIGHT.
MAYBE I REALLY CAN'T DO THIS.

THEY'VE BEEN TELLING ME SO, MY ENTIRE LIFE.

BUT THE THING IS... THIS TIME, IT'S DIFFERENT.

I KNOW I CAN FIGHT.

I ALREADY HAVE BEEN.

MOM...
DAD...
I KNOW YOU'RE
WORRIED.
BUT I'VE BEEN
TRAINING FOR
A LONG TIME.

I KNOW MY
LIMITS.

AND I
KNOW MY OWN
CAPABILITIES.

I'M HERE
TODAY SO THAT KIDS
LIKE ME... WITH SICKLE CELL...
KNOW THAT WE CAN DO ANYTHING
WE SET OUR MINDS TO.

EVERYONE THINKS
WE'RE FRAGILE AND INCAPABLE.
WE'RE NOT!

WOW. SHE'S ALL GROWN UP.

I CAN DO THIS.

I, WELL... OKAY.
I BELIEVE YOU.

WELL, THAT'S QUITE NOBLE OF YOU, BUT--
ACTUALLY,
THE RULEBOOK ONLY
BARRS CONTESTANTS
FROM PARTICIPATING

IF THEY'RE
PHYSICALLY
UNABLE TO
CONTINUE
FIGHTING.

KARA SEEMS FINE TO ME.

IN FACT, IF YOU
DISQUALIFIED HER, KARA
WOULD PROBABLY HAVE A GOOD
CASE FOR REPORTING
DISCRIMINATION...

WE'RE HERE AT THE SEMI-FINALS OF THE 29TH POWER GAMES!

STARTING ON
THE EAST SIDE
OF THE ARENA
IS A DARK HORSE,
NEW UP-AND-COMER
KARA JACKSON!

I CAN'T LET
NIKO GET
UNDER MY
SKIN...

VS

NIKO TURNER-WRIGHT
15 YEARS OLD
CRYOKINESIS

KARA JACKSON
14 YEARS OLD
ELECTROKINESIS

AND ON THE WEST SIDE,
THE CONTESTANT THAT
MANY HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR,
PRINCE OF HOARFROST
NIKO TURNER-WRIGHT!

WHAT?

I SEE YOU'RE
GETTING SPECIAL
TREATMENT
AGAIN.

YOU DON'T
KNOW?
NOBODY EVER
GIVES YOU
A HARD
TIME!

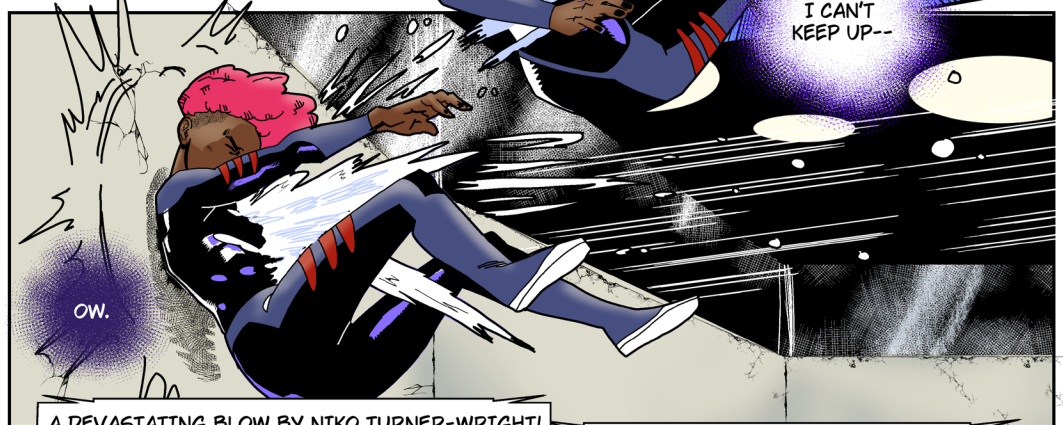
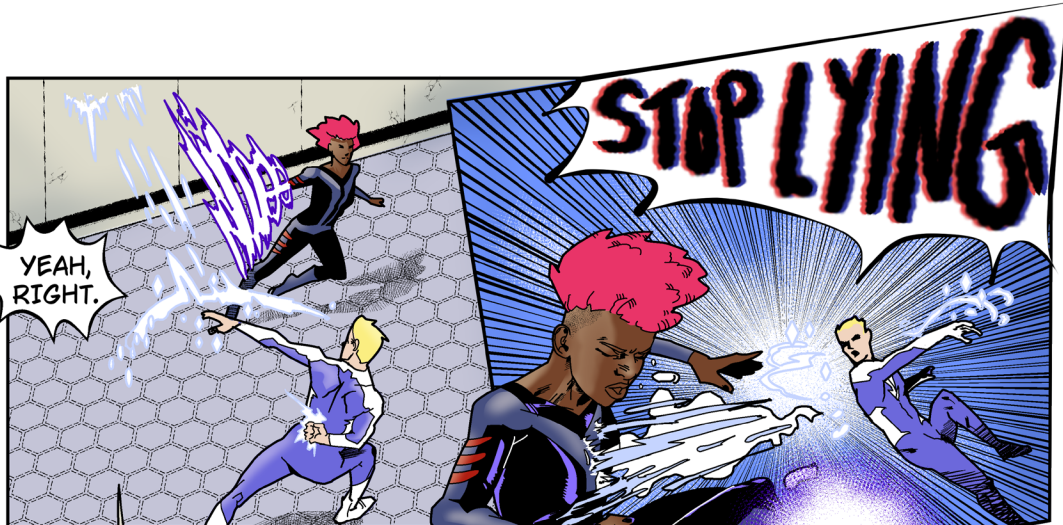
GET HER, NIKO!

I TOLD YOU!
I DON'T SKIP BECAUSE
I WANT TO!

IT'S NOT
SPECIAL TREATMENT!
I NEED THOSE
ACCOMMODATIONS
TO KEEP UP
IN SCHOOL!

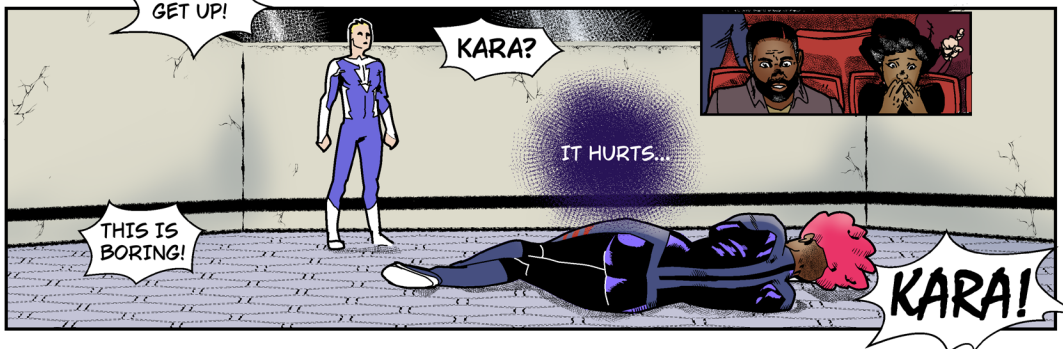
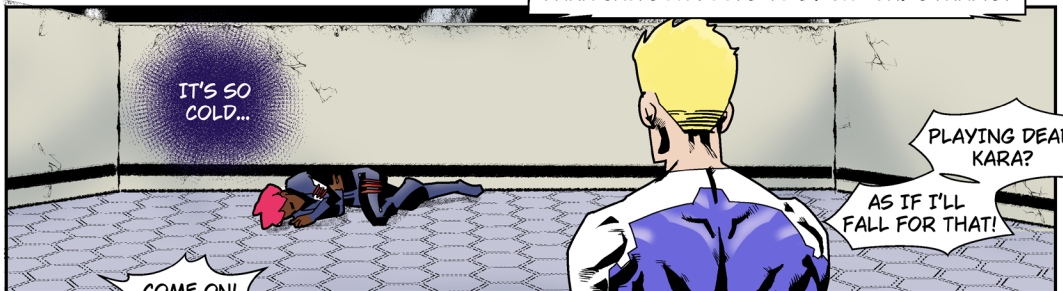
YOU HAVE
NO IDEA
WHAT IT'S LIKE
TO BE ME--

USING THE
STAFF-ONLY ELEVATORS,
EXTRA TIME ON EXAMS,
CUTTING CLASSES,
MISSING TRAINING
AT THE DROP OF A HAT,
AND NOBODY EVER
SAYS A THING!

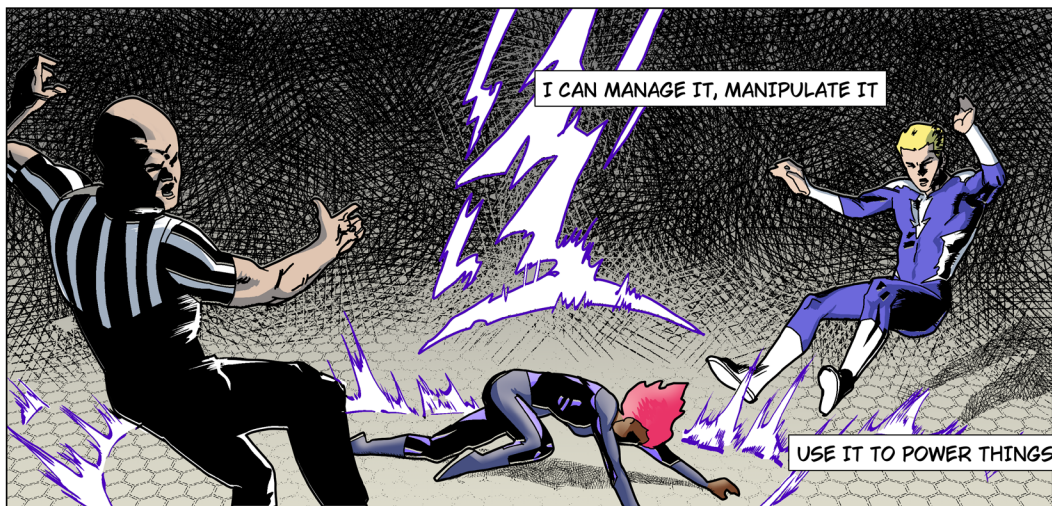


A DEVASTATING BLOW BY NIKO TURNER-WRIGHT!

KARA JACKSON LOOKS TO BE IN DIRE STRAITS!



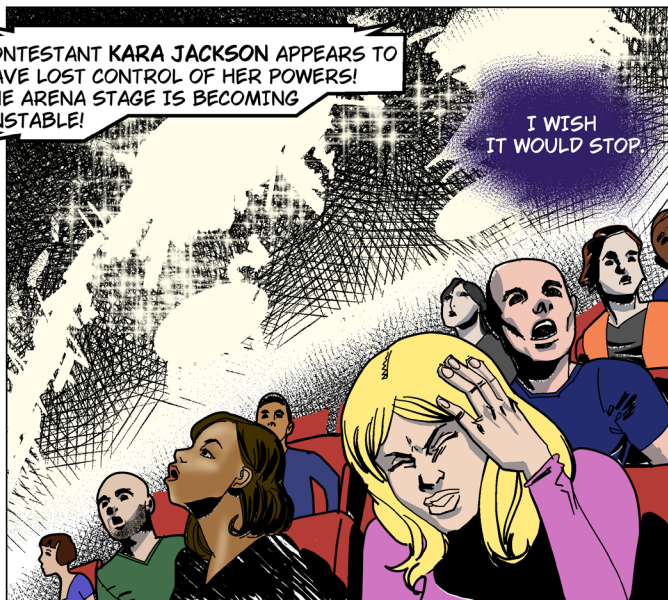
I WAS BORN WITH LIGHTNING IN MY VEINS.



BUT SOMETIMES...



CONTESTANT KARA JACKSON APPEARS TO HAVE LOST CONTROL OF HER POWERS! THE ARENA STAGE IS BECOMING UNSTABLE!





KARA!

MIGO...

YOUR MOM'S
COMING WITH
YOUR PAIN MEDS.

IT HURTS.

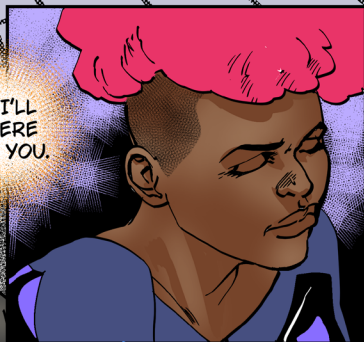
I KNOW. BUT YOU HAVE TO
CONTROL YOUR POWERS. RELEASE IT
THROUGH THE GROUND OR SOMETHING
OR THE MEDICS CAN'T GET TO YOU.

I JUST WANT
IT TO STOP.

I UNDERSTAND.
I HAVE SICKLE CELL, TOO.
I HEAR YOU.
I SEE YOU.

AND I'LL
BE HERE
WITH YOU.

OKAY.



WHAT. A
FIRECRACKER! IMPRESSIVE RANGE
SHE'S GOT, THERE, ON THAT EMP ABILITY.
IT LOOKS LIKE THEY'RE GOING TO HAVE TO
POSTPONE THE TOURNAMENT UNTIL THIS
ALL GETS FIXED. WHEW!



DRAW!

NIKO VS. KARA
0-0

BEFORE TODAY, I THOUGHT I WAS ALONE.

HEY! KARA!

KARA, I, UH...

I'M SORRY!

I SWEAR I JUST WANTED TO KNOCK YOU OUT OF BOUNDS. AND I SHOULDN'T--
ABOUT SICKLE CELL--
I DIDN'T REALIZE IT WAS LIKE THAT--

I-I SHOULDN'T HAVE TOLD THEM-- I DIDN'T THINK--

YES, YOU DIDN'T.

YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO HAVE SICKLE CELL. AT ALL.

BUT I WANT TO LEARN. I'M SORRY. CAN WE START OVER?

OKAY.

HEY! MY DAD SAYS HE'S GONNA TAKE US ALL OUT FOR PIZZA. WANNA COME?

I... SHOULD PROBABLY GO HOME. NEXT TIME, THOUGH!

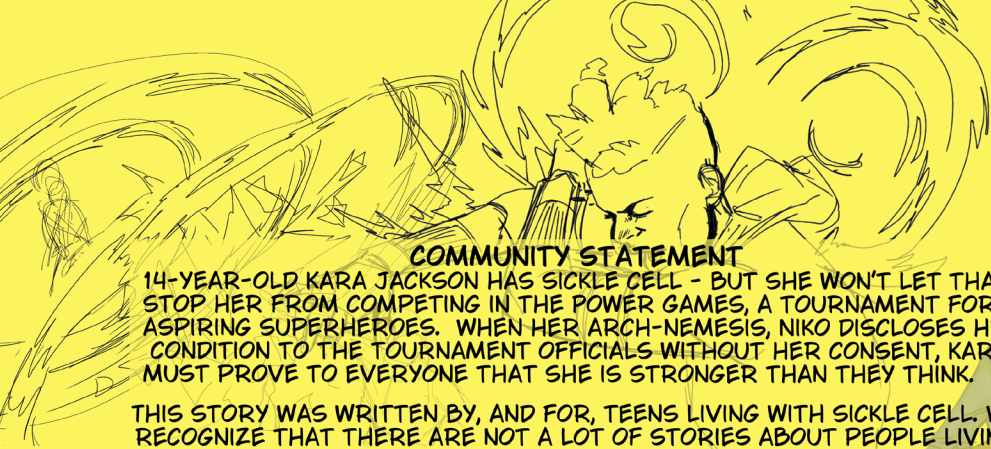
WHAT ABOUT THIS WEEKEND?

AM I INVITED?

NOPE! BUT YOU CAN WATCH US SADLY FROM THE NEXT TABLE!

AW, C'MON!

I'M NOT ALONE ANYMORE.



COMMUNITY STATEMENT

14-YEAR-OLD KARA JACKSON HAS SICKLE CELL - BUT SHE WON'T LET THAT STOP HER FROM COMPETING IN THE POWER GAMES, A TOURNAMENT FOR ASPIRING SUPERHEROES. WHEN HER ARCH-NEMESIS, NIKO DISCLOSES HE CONDITION TO THE TOURNAMENT OFFICIALS WITHOUT HER CONSENT, KARA MUST PROVE TO EVERYONE THAT SHE IS STRONGER THAN THEY THINK.

THIS STORY WAS WRITTEN BY, AND FOR, TEENS LIVING WITH SICKLE CELL. WE RECOGNIZE THAT THERE ARE NOT A LOT OF STORIES ABOUT PEOPLE LIVING WITH SICKLE CELL AND WE WANTED THIS TO CHANGE. THIS COMIC BOOK IS MEANT TO RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT SICKLE CELL AND HIGHLIGHT THE STRUGGLE THAT KIDS LIKE US GO THROUGH EVERY DAY. FROM PAIN CRISES TO FEELINGS OF DOUBT AROUND OUR OWN ABILITIES, WE HAVE ALL BEEN THERE. TO THE YOUTH WHO ARE READING THIS: WE HOPE THAT, LIKE KARA, YOU CAN FIND WAYS TO RESPECT YOUR LIMITS, PERSEVERE, AND TRIUMPH IN YOUR OWN WAY. MOST OF ALL, WE WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT YOU'RE NOT ALONE. WE'RE HERE WITH YOU.

ABOUT NEXT STEP

NEXT STEP IS A CAMBRIDGE BASED NON PROFIT THAT SERVES YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING WITH CHRONIC AND SERIOUS ILLNESS. WE BELIEVE THAT A YOUNG PERSON'S MEDICAL CONDITION SHOULD NOT DEFINE THEM. OUR PROGRAMS AIM TO SHATTER LIMITATIONS AND ELEVATE ASPIRATIONS OF OUR YOUNG PEOPLE AS THEY TRANSITION INTO ADULTHOOD. FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT WWW.NEXTSTEPNET.ORG

SPECIAL THANKS

THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN A LABOR OF LOVE BY MANY PEOPLE - ALL OF WHOM CARE DEEPLY ABOUT ENSURING THAT THIS STORY REACHES YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SICKLE CELL. FIRST AND FOREMOST, I WANT TO THANK THE MENTEEES WHO PARTICIPATED IN STRIVE DURING THE 2020-2021 ACADEMIC YEAR - THIS IS YOUR STORY AND THANK YOU FOR SHARING IT WITH OTHER YOUTH.

THANK YOU AS WELL TO OUR MENTORS - YOUR EFFORTS IN SUPPORTING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGHOUT THE PANDEMIC AND WITH THIS STORY ARE GREATLY APPRECIATED. IN PARTICULAR, THANK YOU TO **ROWAN KIM** - WHOSE EFFORTS AND COMMITMENT SERIOUSLY HELPED MOVE THIS PROJECT FORWARD AT EVERY STAGE. THANK YOU AS WELL TO OUR PROGRAM DIRECTOR, **KEPLER JEUDY** FOR GUIDING THE PROJECT, BEING OUR WORDSMITH, AND HELPING MAKE THIS REAL.

I'D LIKE TO OFFER A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO **REED HILL** WHOSE ARTISTIC TALENTS TRULY HELPED BRING THIS STORY TO LIFE. REED, YOU TRULY HAVE A GIFT - THANK YOU FOR LENDING IT TO OUR YOUTH AND MAKING THEIR VISION A REALITY.

