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Opening extract from

Meta Wars 1: Fight for the Future

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META WARS

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META WARS

FIGHT FOR THE FUTURE

JEFF NORTON



To Sidonie. For believing in me

1

The race was on.

Jonah Delacroix pushed the wheels under his feet hard into the ground, propelling himself forward and breaking away from the pack. Tonight's race, under the cover of darkness and in full violation of national curfew, brought over a hundred racers from across south London to compete in a vicious roller derby. The prize was cold, hard meta-dollars. Enough cash to keep Jonah and his mum fed and sheltered for at least six months. He needed to win.

Jonah was smaller than the other racers and he would be cut down and torn up if he stayed in the pack. He charged ahead to put a safe distance between him and the twenty lead skaters he'd been keeping pace with. Jonah felt his blades eating up the road. His posture, his balance and his rhythm were perfect. The mouldering warehouses that lined this disused service road flashed by with breath-taking speed. It almost felt like flying.

Almost.

It was the closest Jonah could get in the real world. When he raced, when he felt the wind whip back his hair, he could almost believe he wasn't here at all, in the

failed state of Britain that supposedly used to be Great, but back in the Metasphere, back in the virtual world that felt so much more real to him than this course, this night, this race.

'Focus,' he whispered to himself. He knew that if he thought too much, let his mind wander, he might hit a pothole and fall.

He had skated this race three times before, and twice he had come close to winning. But not close enough. Jonah had been practising each night for two months. He knew every bend, every turn, every bump and pothole on this course. He knew where every fallen lamppost and overstuffed recycling machine was that would get in his way.

He spotted the bus stop, the halfway mark, and had to force himself not to laugh at its quaintness.

He could win, this time. He had to win. He had cashed in nearly all of his meta-dollars to enter the race, but the pot was well worth it. Enough to pay for food and even rent on the upper deck for half a year, if he and his mum ate carefully. It would be their first lucky break in years.

Jonah trailed behind only four competitors, but he was keeping pace with them, doing better than he'd ever performed before. But then, as he tried to overtake one of the bigger racers, he saw something sparkling on his leather jacket. Razor wire!

The razor-clad racer swiped furiously at Jonah with

his right arm. Jonah crisscrossed his legs and pulled himself into a tuck. The deadly arm swung over his head and Jonah pushed all of his power down into his left blade to escape.

I cannot lose tonight.

He sprinted hard, out of the reach of the razor wire.

Up ahead, he spotted the tall, faded sign of a shuttered DIY warehouse that marked the final stretch. Jonah had a clear but distant memory of visiting that building with his dad. He remembered standing on a pushcart, hovering over the shiny floor as his dad pushed him down the main aisle, rows of toilets and tools whooshing by. It had felt like flying.

When Jonah reached the sign, sun-bleached and cracked, he took encouragement from its slogan: *DIY: Get To It!*

He pushed his aching legs harder and faster than ever before. One more burst of speed and he could actually win. He made a perfect lunge turn, and stalked the three leaders, gaining on them.

For the first time in a long time, Jonah felt hopeful.

Get to it!

Oblivious to the roller race that was about to speed past, two figures skulked outside the boarded-up DIY warehouse.

Sam, the smaller and younger of the two, a seventeen-year-old girl with short-cut red hair, didn't know what

'DIY' meant, but took comfort in the encouragement that the faded sign gave her. *Get To It!* She was about to. Even if *it* was illegal and very dangerous.

Wearing a fitted black jumpsuit and a charcoal backpack, Sam blended into the darkness as she kept watch over the empty stretch of road.

A few steps behind Sam, an older man worked at the warehouse door with a crowbar. An old-fashioned tool for an old-fashioned job. The man had greying hair, a straggly beard and intense eyes. He wore black coveralls like Sam's. He was called Axel, but to Sam he had another name. To her, Axel was 'Dad'.

With a splintering of wood, the door flew open. Axel motioned to Sam to follow him through it. She pulled a torch from one of her many pouches, snapped it on.

As she stepped into the dark warehouse, she felt a chill settling on her shoulders.

Great, angular shapes towered before Sam, rows and rows of them. In the light of her torch beam, she could see their dull grey surfaces. Mainframe computers. Server racks. They were old, decades old, but still working. They hummed and clicked almost smugly to themselves.

Sam hadn't imagined the drop in temperature. A cold draught played about her neck from an air-conditioning vent in the wall. Despite this, the air in the warehouse was thick with dust, and her nose itched uncontrollably.

In a far corner of the ceiling, she could see a red

pinpoint of light. She took Axel by the arm, directing his gaze towards it. He nodded. 'Motion detectors,' he muttered, 'and they've already sensed us. Nothing we didn't expect.'

'All the same,' said Sam, 'we should get to it.' She shrugged the pack from her back and fumbled with its straps.

'No need to rush, kiddo,' said Axel. 'The police will be across town, chasing after Bradbury's distraction. They'll never get bikes here before we're done.'

'You hope,' said Sam, 'but what if they didn't fall for the distraction? What if they left a patrol in this area?'

Sometimes, she felt like she was the grown-up and Axel the teenager, like she had to look after him when it should have been the other way round. Her father was all impulse and no thought, and in Sam's eyes this was a dangerous thing, especially in their line of work. She had to admit, though, that his instincts were usually good.

She produced the first of the explosives from her pack, handed them to him. They were plastique, off-white in colour, the size and shape of house bricks. Axel began to place them around the warehouse, as Sam unwound the detonator cord.

Her hands were trembling. She willed them to stop. There was nothing to be afraid of – as long as she kept her cool. Anyway, it was too late to back out now, even if she had wanted to.

Sam and Axel were Guardians. To many, that meant

they were terrorists – or 'internet insurgents' – but Sam knew the truth. She knew the Guardians were fighting for everyone's freedom. She believed in that cause, and was ready to fight for it.

But was she ready to die for it?