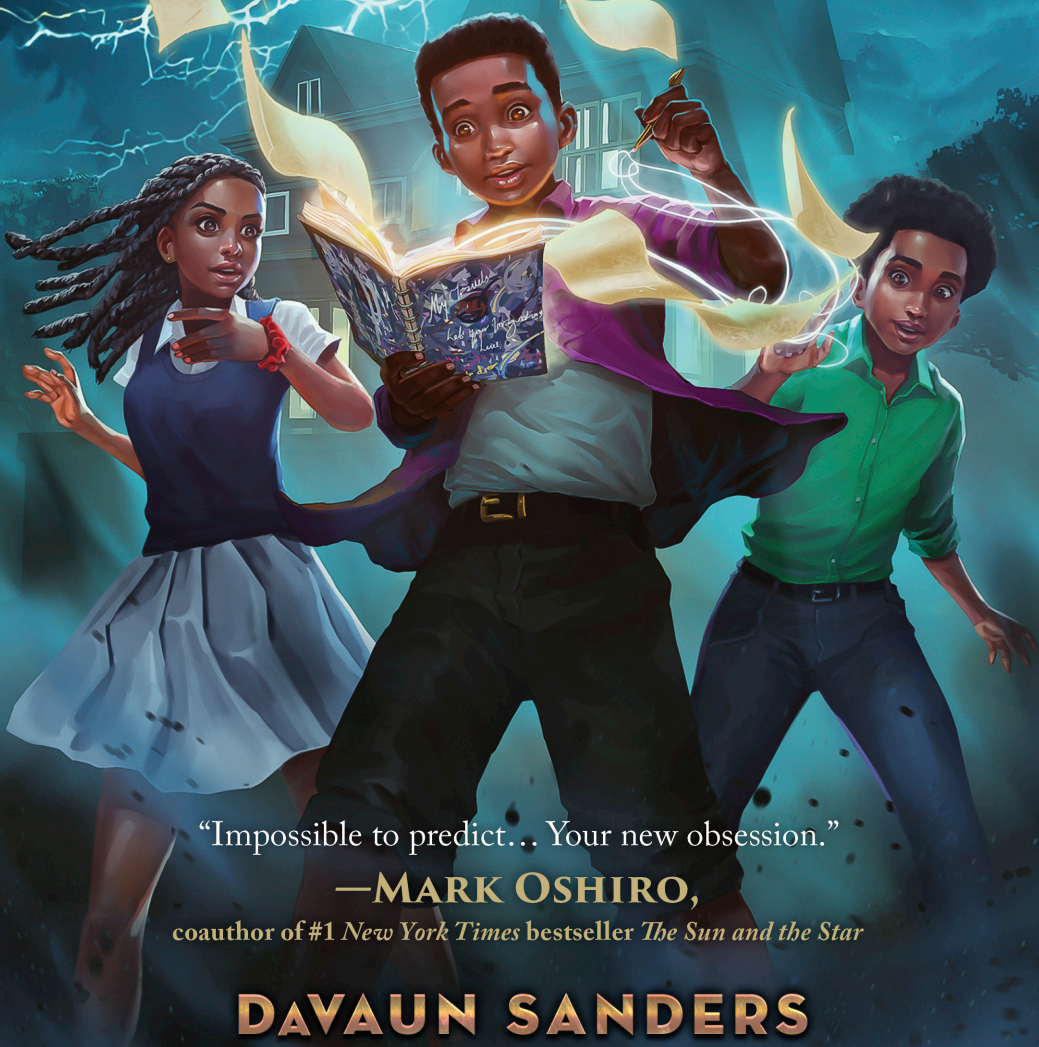


KEYNAN MASTERS

AND THE PEERLESS MAGIC CREW



“Impossible to predict... Your new obsession.”

—MARK OSHIRO,

coauthor of #1 *New York Times* bestseller *The Sun and the Star*

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Keynan Masters and the Peerless Magic Crew

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For Azure & Dakari

CHAPTER ONE

BIZZY BLOCK

Quiet as it's kept, this summer is my most epic yet.

You see what I did there? I know you did! A year ago, that rhyme would've cost me ten pages worth of scribbles. My poems are on a whole new level now, all because I finally figured out one lesson: you can never *ever* trust your eyes. They'll lie to you. Every time.

Take today's chores in my baba's garden. Tickle leaf weeds are real slick, trying to mimic our fruits and veggies. But I knew something was up when the strawberries started giggling. Nope! Snatch 'em by their wiggling roots.

Pumping water from the creek and turning the compost used to cramp my arms into pretzels. Waste of time, right? Wrong! My hands are so strong, I can write all night.

Then...there's bug picking. Can't lie, I hate bugs. Like the three-headed caterpillar gobbling up our collard greens this morning. Big nope. But even those little monsters teach me about...dedication? Never skipping on snacks, even if a shoe is about to step on my three greedy faces?

Okay, so my chores are actually awful. But that's not important. What I meant about never trusting your eyes? Great poems get past the surface, past what your eyes show you. And that's an awesome feeling—at least, when there's time to chase the perfect lines.

Today I'm ahead of schedule, which means extra rhyme time. I sneak through the corn rows my parents planted after a storm sucked up the old Jefferson house, foundation and all, right into the sky.

That one almost got my mama when I was a baby. Baba says she's never been the same since. Sometimes she'll freeze up in the garden, hands shaking until he comes running to whisper in her ear and calm her down. We were lucky—storms can wolf down whole neighborhoods in one gulp. An old shed on the far edge of the Jefferson land survived somehow, and it's my third-favorite place to write. I perch with my notebook on an old tractor tire that's wide as my bed.

My name is Keynan Masters and I run
things on this block,
My lines will make you sit up straight like
celery stalks—

Umm, no. Let's run that back.

Friends call me Keymaster,
and poetry is what I do best,
I'm faster than pretenders,
tougher than an algebra test—

No, no, no. I'd rip the page out of my notebook and hide the evidence, but paper is too valuable to waste. Sometimes writing starts out all hard and tough and crusty on the outside. Like a seed. The goodness only comes with a little soil, clean water, and bright sunshine. And lots of love. You can't forget the love.

I stand and stretch, just in time to see my baba beelining through the stalks of corn like he knows exactly where I am. Busted. I slide my notebook out of sight. "Hey Dad, wassup?"

"Hey yourself. You ain't hear your mama calling you?" He slides a chunky fist forward, solid as a brick, and mine meets it halfway.

"Nope. Is she okay?"

"She's fine. But you're supposed to be spraying pepper soap on the tomatoes."

"I did. See?" He nods grudgingly at my half-empty spray bottle.

We look so much alike he might as well be a walking, talking mirror. Deep brown eyes, temple fades—although I've got a frohawk going while his hair is always short—and we're both lanky and lean. I finally caught Mama this summer, I'm betting I only need two more to stand eye to eye with Heck Masters. We're the exact same shade of brown in the winter, but I'm darker than him now—which is weird because he's outside twice as long as I am. But what about grown-ups isn't weird, if you stop and think about it too hard?

"Finished early," I add. "So thought I'd rest my eyes a bit."

"On this old, smelly, comfortable tire. Right. Come on, let's hear it."

The weather's perfect, but my face is suddenly extra hot. "It's um...not ready yet."

"We're waiting for this performance you promised. Along with all of Bizzy Block. Don't let great—"

"—be the enemy of good. I know, I know."

He's always ready with these little sayings that make so much sense you can't help but roll your eyes. I've pored

through every faded and flaking page of my parents' poetry books, just as hungry as that caterpillar, and I still don't know how he pulls them out of nowhere like that. I squeeze my notebook a little tighter. "This one just needs a lil more spit. It's special."

"Hmm. Now if we only knew a place that could help with that. A school, maybe. With teachers who live and breathe everything you need to know about the world."

Here we go. Get comfy. My parents are mostly great, but there's this one small annoying thing: they are obsessed with the Peerless Academy. Sometime last year I received an invitation to enroll—my very first letter, even!—because of my grades in our virtual program, *Build-A-Scholar*. But I'm Keynan Masters, and I run things on this block, remember? "Everything I need is right here."

"You say that now, but Bizzy Block is too small for you. And don't you wanna make flesh-and-blood friends?"

I wince. He's actually got a point there. "Peerless just ain't for me."

Why would I need strangers to tell me my poetry is amazing? No thanks. My parents are so bummed, though. My mama's bottom lip actually poked out when I first told them I wasn't going! You would think Peerless was *their* school, like they went there when they were kids or some-

thing. They still bust out a whole lecture whenever I slip and fuss about virtual classes getting too easy.

That's the mess I'm stuck in now. All I can do is ride it out while my baba goes on and on. "...and the new stuff you'll learn! I'd bet a month's chores someone from Peerless keeps these storms from snacking on folks like—"

A sudden breeze sends the nearby stalks rippling, slicing off whatever he was about to say. He stares through the corn toward the street, forehead crinkling up. "Anyway. Since you finished chores early, you can get ahead on schoolwork." He gives me a wink. "After you polish your rhymes."

That's weird. Heck Masters never breaks from the schedule. I'm usually all for a changeup if it means more rhyme time. But he's worried, and my baba never gets worried. "Where are you going?" I ask.

"Delivery drone crashed into Old Zeph's squash patch this morning. We've gotta get it fixed before someone comes looking for it. Repair crews ain't cheap." He glances at the sky, and I realize why he's dragging his feet.

"But it's your turn to check the storm siren."

"Yup." There's no putting that off. When they don't think I'm listening, the whole neighborhood whispers about how the next storm might be the last one for Bizzy Block. It's been more than ten years since one hit us—like *forever*

ago, basically—but grown-ups still watch the sky like it was yesterday. “I’ll head that way first. We can’t let it slide because—”

“Work undone is wasted fun,” I groan.

“What, you’re not gonna write that one down?”

“Dad.”

“One day you’ll be this talented. I believe in you! The genes alone—”

“Dad! Would you please go somewhere?”

He laughs, cutting across our cracked asphalt half-court, waving at neighbors on the way. Baba and his jokes. And his schedules.

Something is still tugging at me though, the same way I saw it tugging at him.

Today is Tuesday. Drones always come on Thursdays. Now I’m curious. Why is a drone here early? Good thing for me I’ve got some extra time to visit the shop.

I turn the opposite way down Bizzy Block. The street itself is part workshop, part farmer’s market, part playground. Our co-op is named after the Bizera family, who started the first community garden back when my grandparents were kids, and people still drove cars sometimes. Eight homes set around one of the old cul-de-sacs, and not one of the families thought to have some kids my age.

I live with it, though. A wordsmith doesn’t always pick

their surroundings. My rhymes will bubble up anyway, like secret ground springs.

Yeah...that's definitely going in my notebook.

I scribble and stroll past Old Zeph's house, where he's waiting on the porch for Chester from around the way. You could set a clock to when they slap the first spinner down on their game of bones.

"Hey now," Zeph croaks from the shade. "Heard you cooking up some new rhymes for the block?"

"Yes sir! About to have everyone's ears on lock!"

He cackles loudly and waves me on. Zeph's not the least bit upset about the drone squishing his squash, and that makes two of us. My mama swears on her recipe book by squash noodles, squash fries, squash pizza. All lies as far as I'm concerned. But living in a co-op means looking out for each other—sharing food, saving power, fixing things. Baba says in the old days there used to be so many drones, they blocked the blue right out of the sky. Neighborhoods like ours were squeezed so close together there wasn't any room for grass or gardens in between. He thinks people took too much for granted before the storms. Bizzy Block has my whole heart, but I can't help wondering how cool things were back then.

I pull aside the big flappy canvas door to duck inside our workshop tent. There are tools everywhere, hanging

on racks or spread out on tables. If the storm siren goes off, whoever's on watch wheels everything into the Kwan family's house, next door to Old Zeph. Most days that's Yua Delmar, Bizzy Block's top gearhead. She's done with virtual school and is one of the smartest people I know. I skirt around a gutted lawn mower to join her beside the unscheduled, out-of-order drone.

"Hey, kiddo."

"Hey, Yua. Need any help?"

"Nah. Pretty easy fix." The drone looks like a big scarab beetle, wider around than I can hug, with four matching turbines paired on both wings. One of the turbines is in pieces, laid out in careful order. "You see the singed metal by the backup rotor?"

"Barely." There's a scorch mark on the disassembled turbine's blades. "That's all it took to crash it?"

"I wish." She studies me for a moment, then flips the drone over with a grunt. "Heck probably wouldn't want you to see this."

Six splintery lines cut across the drone's belly, so deep the components inside might spill out. Spiderweb cracks spread from each line, glimmering like they're still hot. A shiver shimmies up my spine. "Whoa. Did this thing fly through a storm?"

"Lightning isn't supposed to stick around afterwards,"

Yua mutters. "And the slashes are too straight. So nah. Something did this. Something with claws." She shakes her head. "I don't know why I'm telling you all that. Keep it hush, okay?"

"Okay." Why is my voice so squeaky? "Did it drop anything?"

"Whatever it was is gone." She's worried too, just like my baba. "We checked everywhere, and plenty of folks saw it fall."

"Weird."

"Yeah. Once I get this rotor spinning again, the programming should be cake." She talks things out while she works, tapping queries into a small interface on the drone's side. A golden flash lights up the turbine's hole.

"Something's sparking in there," I say, peering into the opening.

"Huh? The power's disconnected."

"I saw it. Something's stuck. I can get it out, just gimme one pluck and a little luck. Hey! Did you—"

"Yes, I saw what you did there, Keynan." Yua rolls her eyes, but I know she loves me. She hands me goggles and some needle-nose pliers with a doubtful shrug. "This isn't your shop day, you know. I don't need Heck in here fussing because I—"

Gold flashes again, and I clamp down on it with the pli-

ers, jiggling out a piece of scrunched-up ribbon. It's the brightest thing I've ever seen, like the fancy clothes we only wear for Founder's Day or Juneteenth. I keep fishing, and a crumpled envelope wiggles loose. A beautiful seal adorns one side, like a crinkled sliver of sticky sunshine. It catches Yua's work lamp, reflecting an engraved letter *P*. The golden seal flashes like headlights on an old car. We both stare at it until Yua blinks and gives me a huge, relieved grin. "Nice! You found the package. That's one mystery solved, at least. Better go get your parents... That looks like big news."

My stomach rumbles like our compost barrel. Despite the wrinkles and creases, I've seen envelopes like this before. I'm surprised my mama doesn't have the first one framed!

Another letter from Peerless. Addressed to me.

CHAPTER TWO

THE GOLDEN SEAL

Now, don't get me wrong. Getting letters feels great! Like, am I growing up? Ascending into adulthood, the land of no rules and unlimited snacks? But it's impossible to enjoy, coming from Peerless. That's like biting into a strawberry turnover, only the inside's filled with pond gloop. I'd bury the envelope in the garden—weird, glowy seal and all—but Yua's watching me with this proud smile on her face. I hold my breath and open it on up:

Dear Keynan Masters,

The new school year in the Peerless Academy of Movement, Art, Genealogy, Instrumentation, and Composition has nearly arrived. Our faculty and staff are thrilled for you to join the

Peerless family. To prepare all new students for this transition, Headmaster Kinder reminds your family to—

Blah blah blah. I skip down to the important parts. Uniforms provided—not my problem. Shuttle pickup is scheduled for—

Hold. On.

I'm enrolled? At Peerless?! How? *Why?*

I read it over again. Class starts in a week. Not a whole lot of prep time. How long had this drone been limping toward Bizzy Block? Whatever it ran into pushed it seriously behind schedule. The letter ends with a fancy signature. This Headmaster Kinder sure is expecting me. There must be some mistake, unless...

My parents.

They didn't. They wouldn't.

Would they?

My heart starts hopscotching around in my chest. I. Have. Questions!

"You look like you're going to pass out." Yua chuckles. "What's wrong?"

"Someone messed up. This can't be mine."

"So do what we all do when something goes wrong—get your mom!"

I race back to my house, wondering if this is why my baba was so off this morning. I find Mama working in our garden.

"Mama! I got another letter from Peerless! Acting like I'm supposed to be there."

She tucks a stray loc behind her ear, eyebrow arched. I thrust the letter out. Her dark brown eyes widen, dipping back and forth over the crinkled paper. "This doesn't make any sense... We all agreed it was best to wait another year."

"Right. Another year." Relief fills me up. I knew they wouldn't flip on me like that. Someone at the school made a mistake, and that's all there is to it.

The seal flashes again, bright enough to reflect in my mama's eyes and turn her brown skin deep gold for an instant. Hold up. Envelopes aren't supposed to do that...

A grin abruptly spreads across her face. "Heck, come out here! Our little one's headed off to Peerless!"

The screen door bangs behind me. "Say what?"

"Say *what?*" I echo.

My baba accepts the letter with a frown. The envelope flashes again, still in my mama's hands, while he reads. Doubt melts away from his face in a blink. "An...acceptance letter. Wow. Wow! This is huge, Keynan."

"But... I'm not going to Peerless," I say slowly. "You told me to trust my gut about it."

My parents exchange one of those annoying grown-up looks, like they share the same brain. My stomach clenches up. They never flip like this, change their minds from one breath to the next.

"Keynan..." Baba's voice quiets. "These online lessons are easy for you, right?"

"Yeah, only—"

"And Yua's taught you how to use everything in the shop. You could be doing so much more."

"Sure, but—"

"And friends your own age? Think on it some more. That's all we're asking."

Mama straightens from gathering up dinner veggies. "This deserves a little celebrating."

My baba nudges me. "Sounds like...tacos?"

"Or snacks?" She winks.

All I can do is stare. Who are these people? My parents are nice, maybe a pinch on the strict side—but bribing my taste buds? So they can slink out of what we all agreed was best?

Everything went left after that letter showed up. Does it just change folks' minds for them? Activate their secret shady side? My parents always do cartwheels whenever

Peerless comes up; maybe they're just excited again. But I know I didn't imagine that golden light. Either way, it's even more proof I'm better off as far away from Peerless as possible.

"Tacos," I agree reluctantly. "And I'll think about it."

"Now we're talking! The internet's actually behaving today, so knock out your lessons first, son," my baba says. "Time for tacos when they're done. Wait—did I just rhyme, again? Did I score a perfect—"

Mama and I both gag and boo until he leaves. So annoying!

"You look like you need a minute to process," she observes.

"Yeah, I kinda do. Why—"

"Well, wash up and help me process these veggies, then. You'll still have plenty of time for homework."

I chop cilantro and she does the tomatoes. It's kind of our thing. She's really pleased, but this funny sound is coming from her throat, like she swallowed a feisty bumblebee.

"What are you doing?" I ask curiously.

"Humming. It's kind of like singing, with your mouth closed."

Weird. That sounds like smelling with your nose shut. "But singing's bad luck, right? Yua's granny says so all the time... So does Dad." The humming is nice, though.

She just smiles. "You love poetry, Keynan. It sings to you. Would Peerless really be so bad?"

"Yes, actually. Why let some dusty Peerless teacher twist up something I'm already good at? Would you let Yua's granny make your turnovers?"

"If I wanted my teeth to hurt all week," she admits. "But that's how it works. I can help her ease back on the sugar. But her dumplings have taught me a thing or two about baking."

Somehow...that makes sense. "Do moms just know all the things?"

"This one does. That cilantro looks good to me. Wrap up lessons, I'll finish dinner."

I head into the office and plop down at the laptop. Lessons are dragging, and I couldn't be happier for a distraction when a game notification pings halfway through my geometry quiz:

Starbreaker wants to chat.

Every other kid in *Build-A-Scholar* uses their boring real-life names, so me and Starbreaker became instant friends. We play Mirror Maze Castle together between classes, whenever storms don't mess with our connection. It's the easiest way to chat without getting in trouble. I pull up the game window:

Starbreaker: sup u late 2day

Keymaster: its been a lot going on

Starbreaker: chores. more mutant bugs

Keymaster: nope. I got this shiny envelope by drone

Starbreaker: afvdouaewfnkoiasfdlknjsdvnjkl

Starbreaker: wait

Starbreaker: an acceptance letter right

Starbreaker: ?

Keymaster: yeah

Starbreaker: YESSSS we both going!!! happy dance
break!

So Starbreaker and me? We've got rules. Don't type *lol* unless you really laugh. Don't leave friends behind in the Mirror Maze Castle dungeon. And happy dances are *not* optional. Even though this one shouldn't be happening.

Not my best moment—I trip twice on the chair—but I keep up my end. The lights flicker, along with my laptop

screen. I glance out the window, but no hint of a storm. No one's sounding the siren, so we're all good. I sit again.

Starbreaker: i was SO scared to say anything.
thought you didn't get in

Me? Not get in? Psshhh—I'm amazing. Of course I got in, but I'm not supposed to *be* in. So how did this Headmaster Kinder person fool my parents into the worst idea ever? They know I love Bizzy Block. They need me here, even if my mama won't admit it. No one likes to talk about how storms might drop in from nowhere—snatch *us* up by *our* roots. And all of our neighbors are like my own built-in audience for whenever I've got fresh rhymes to share. Where else will I find that? Peerless doesn't deserve my best, and I'm not gonna stress over a school I don't need to impress.

Oohhhh...lemme write that down, too!

The laptop pings again. I'm scribbling so hard I forgot about the chat.

Starbreaker: hellloooooooo

Starbreaker: ur net go out? Ours been trash all day

Keymaster: here sorry. hey...i'm not going. to peerless

Starbreaker: ...wait how?? if you got a letter u going.
parents signed you up

Keymaster: i just gotta talk to them

Starbreaker: but they already agreed

Starbreaker: we don't get to choose

I still don't believe it. Not for a second. My baba talks so much about me finding my own way, trusting my gut about things. Why would Peerless be any different?

Keymaster: i do. sorry

Keymaster: will u still play mirror maze at least

Starbreaker: really?? welp ;(thought you would
have my back

Starbreaker: there's something off about

Starbreaker: actually nvm

Starbreaker: you'll be too busy flicking bugs. g2g
finish packing. c u around brick brain!

<<Starbreaker has left Mirror Maze Castle!>>

Did that just happen? Peerless is stealing my bestie from me, too! Somehow I feel guilty, like I'm letting Starbreaker down. Who knows if the school lets students play Mirror Maze Castle? But that's another day's problem. Right now, I just need my parents off Team Peerless and back on Team Keynan.

I better hurry up and figure out how before it's time for chow.

I'm so worried over what to do I forget to write that one down.