



## SLAY 1. PLAYING THE GAME

By day, I'm an honors student at Jefferson Academy. At night, I turn into the Nubian goddess most people know as Emerald.

The second the bell rings, I'm out of my desk seat and bolting through the classroom door. There's a battle tonight between PrestoBox, a master wizard from the Tundra, and Zama, a Voodoo queen from the same region. I absolutely can't miss it. Once safely in the hallway, I pull out my phone and open WhatsApp to find a new text from the game mod, Cicada.

Cicada: You watching the tundra semifinals tonight?

I smile, glancing up for a second to watch where I'm going as throngs of students pour from classrooms and navigate around me.

Me: Wouldn't miss it.

"Hey, Kix!" comes Harper's voice, startling me from my thoughts. I look up to see her and my sister, Steph, walking toward me in their matching pink T-shirts with the Greek letters for Beta Beta Psi, a collective of the eight most outspoken, unapologetic, woke feminists at Jefferson Academy. Leave it to my parents to transfer us to a high school that prepares its students for college so thoroughly, they claim to have the most robust high school Greek life program in the country.

"Hey, Harp. Hey, Steph," I say, trying not to sound disappointed that I won't get out of here for another ten minutes. I slip my phone into my back pocket and put on my best happy to see you face.

"Hey, Kiera," Steph says with a grin, brushing her bangs out of the way of her lime-green glasses. Steph has a new pair of cheap plastic glasses for each day of the week, and her hair is always pressed straight and cut neatly at her shoulders. She insists keeping her hair straight saves time in the morning, but until she can prove it, I'll keep my five-minute wake-up-and-shake-out-my-twist-out routine.

"I'm heading home early today to get started on our Beta Beta posters for the game next week," she says. "Each one is going to have an inspirational word at the top in huge bubble letters—like 'endurance' and 'perseverance.' We're going to have the players sign them and put them up in the halls around school afterward. Plus, Mom said she'll take me out later tonight to get more permit hours. Wanna walk with me?"

I thought endurance and perseverance were kind of the same thing, but if I start in on that conversation, I really won't get out of this hallway before the duel starts. Harper chimes in before I can answer.

“Actually, Steph,” says Harper, “I wanted to talk to Kix for a second. Need to ask her advice about something.”

That’s what she calls me. Kix. Like the cereal. Or like the shoes. I can’t tell and never bothered to ask. Steph and I look at each other. We both know what’s coming. Harper is about to ask me an impossible question, because she knows Steph isn’t going to give her a straight answer.

“Well, now I’m curious,” says Steph. “What is it?”

Harper glances over her shoulder as if she’s watching for someone, and she folds her arms across her chest and shrugs.

“It feels kind of weird to even be asking this question, but I’m asking because I genuinely don’t know the answer.”

I sigh and nod at her to just ask the question already. She always prefaces these with a disclaimer if it’s going to be one of those questions with two wrong answers. She didn’t used to be like this. When we were kids, Harper used to come over our house for Mario Kart, Legacy of Planets, and snacks. We used to talk about Usher and Fresh Prince, and boys in our class, and babysit her little brother, Wyatt. But now Steph is president of Beta Beta, and Harper is VP, and as royalty of the most feminist high school sorority in the country, Harper acts like she has to talk about polarizing stuff all the time.

“Okay, fine,” says Harper when it becomes apparent Steph isn’t going anywhere. “I was thinking about changing my hair. Something fun and new, but, like, with bohemian vibes. There’s one style I really want to get, but I need to ask you about it first.”

Steph and I exchange looks again. When it comes to hair discussions, Steph and I have been on the Black girl hair journey together, and we have more in common than she and Harper ever will in the hair department. But I look back up at Harper, with her short blond pixie that hasn’t held a curl since middle school prom, when her mother had to use half a can of hair spray. She’s the only person I know who can rock a pixie like that, and since she stands about a foot taller than me with a long, willowy frame, it fits her. But I let her finish her question.

“I need to, like, ask you, though, and don’t be afraid to say no,” she begins. “Am I allowed to get dreadlocks?”

Oh, what a question. Is she allowed to get dreadlocks? She’s asking permission to wear a hairstyle that’s been debated by people of many races for years and years as to whether it’s appropriating Black culture. How am I supposed to tell her yes without giving the disclaimer that I can’t speak for all Black people, and that she could ask any of us this question and get a different answer every time?

“That’d make a great question for the Weekly!” chimes in Wyatt, stepping between Steph and me, leaning his arm on her shoulder and grinning at me. Nobody would guess by their looks that Harper and Wyatt are brother and sister. And by Wyatt’s freckles, bright blue eyes, messy

dishwater-blond hair, lanky frame, and lack of height, nobody would guess he's sixteen, and not twelve.

"I, uh . . .," I begin, looking to Steph. She's always better with these kinds of situations than I am.

"Seriously, Kiera, can I interview you about this?" Wyatt asks with that big, toothy grin. Even though he's only a junior, he's chief editor for the Jefferson Weekly, and he runs the political topics column like a criminal investigator, hyperanalyzing his interviewees' answers, looking for cracks in their views so he can write them up with those clickbaity titles he always uses. I can see it now: "Black People Don't Mind White People Wearing This ONE Hairstyle."

Between Wyatt as chief editor for the school newspaper even though he's only a junior, and Steph, also a junior, as president of Beta Beta Psi, I feel like my college applications could have been so much more resplendent than they were when I submitted them. If only I could include my favorite after-school activity in my list of accomplishments.

"You can interview me!" offers Steph, and I can't help but smile a bit. There's no way Wyatt's going to go for that. Steph is an expert debater who gives airtight answers to any question you ask her.

"We all know what you think about white people doing things, Steph," says Wyatt. "You tell us all the goddamn time."

Steph punches his arm so hard, he flinches and holds it close to him.

"Really?" he asks.

"I mean, if you're going to assume I'm going to be an angry Black woman about this, I wouldn't want to disappoint you."

"Steph," I say, shaking my head. She's talking too loud in this hallway, and people are looking at us now. The last thing the only two Black girls at Jefferson Academy need is to be seen as the loud ones. I just want to go home. Without having to answer Harper's question. I just want to log in, transform into Emerald, and talk to Cicada for the rest of the night.

"I'll have to think about that, Harper," I say, hoping she'll wait awhile and maybe forget about it.

"Okay," she says, obviously disappointed, folding her arms over her chest. "Oh, we're still on for math at eight tonight, right?"

Oh shit. It's Thursday. I had to move Harper's and my tutoring lesson to Thursday this week since Wyatt is playing in the Civil War baseball game next week and Steph and Harper need time tomorrow when they're both available to write their opening speech as president and VP of Beta Beta. But I do need the money. Cicada and I want to add more RAM to our servers because we're about to launch more game cards soon. That's sixty bucks down the drain if I cancel this week.

“Uh,” I begin. When I say I absolutely can’t miss the Tundra Semifinals today, I mean it. I need to be there. The game gets bugs sometimes. Weird stuff starts happening when people try to hack in coins or trade new weapons. Lately, characters have been glitching out when they use a new crossbow that was released last week—falling through the map or losing upgrades—and when that happens, everyone blows up my DMs. Why?

Because I’m the game developer.

Nobody knows. Not even my family. Not even my boyfriend, Malcolm.

“Pretty sure my queen is busy tonight,” comes a familiar voice from behind me. Two strong arms encircle my waist and kisses are being planted gently up the back of my neck, and I can smell Malcolm’s Ralph Lauren cologne behind me.

“Hey,” I say happily, looking up to see the progress he’s making with his goatee, smiling when I see he had his dreads freshly twisted this weekend, his Killmonger hairdo. I cuddle up under his arm. Normally, I would call him Boo, but I feel weird using that word in front of everyone here.

“Aaaand, that’s my cue to go!” announces Steph, turning on her heel and heading swiftly for the front door.

I have to physically concentrate on not rolling my eyes. Steph and Malcolm hate each other for the pettiest reasons. Malcolm thinks Black women don’t need sororities because they’re already sisters, and the word “sorority” is a fancy word for clique. Steph thinks men have no business telling women what to do. That leaves me in the chasm in the middle, agreeing with both of them.

Harper and Wyatt exchange glances. They always get quiet around Malcolm, the kid who got expelled from Belmont High on the south side.

“Right,” says Wyatt, glancing over his shoulder, probably to make sure Steph is far enough away not to hear him. “Soooo, just let me know about the interview, okay?”

I look up at Malcolm, whose thick eyebrows have sunken slightly.

“What kinda interview?” he asks.

“Wyatt wants to interview me for the Jefferson Weekly,” I say quickly, hoping Wyatt catches my hints. “It’s about Black hair. I think Wyatt’s trying to give diverse opinions some visibility in the paper.”

Malcolm motions to Wyatt with his chin and says, “‘Bout time we had more diverse opinions in the Weekly. Okay, Wyatt, I see you.”

Which means, in Malcolm-speak, “well done.”

I nod and smile at Wyatt and glance at Harper, who's looking between me and Malcolm like she knows there's nothing she can contribute to this conversation, and that we'll have to discuss the whole dreadlocks thing later, when we're not in front of Malcolm, whose verdict on the subject she already knows.

"Tutoring some other time, Harper, okay? I'm sorry, but I really am busy tonight. We'll meet next week."

I'll let Harper and Wyatt think I want a night alone with Malcolm. I'll let Malcolm think I have homework.

"Thanks," I say to him once Harper and Wyatt have turned and walked halfway down the hall. But before I can even begin explaining to him why he can't come over tonight, he's looking at me with disappointment in his dark, glistening eyes, studying mine.

"What's up?" I ask.

"You were doing it again," he says, pulling his arm from around me and opening his locker. He slings his backpack off his shoulder, pulls out a couple of textbooks and his vape pen from the bottom shelf, and stuffs them inside his bag.

"Doing what?"

"The voice."

I roll my eyes.

"That's the only voice I have."

"That's the only voice you have when you're around those two," he says, pointing down the hall at them. Then he pauses, and his expression softens. "I love you. You know that."

He leans in and kisses my forehead before pressing his forehead against mine.

"I want you to be yourself around me, and around them. I want my Black goddess all the time, but you out here sounding like you work in a call center."

I wish I could invite Malcolm into my world after school, into my game, where every word I speak reflects the Black goddess he sees in me, the one he got to see at Belmont, the one who rocked braids and almost made the Belmont High drill team. The walls may have been defaced with vandalism, and the lockers may have been falling apart, but at least we got to be ourselves.

I smile up at him now. He has a scar in the middle of his bottom lip from the fight that got him expelled from Belmont—the fight that might have gotten me hurt if he hadn't intervened.

I step up on my tiptoes and kiss that scar. Malcolm and I left Belmont together after freshman year, and Steph joined us. I left so many of our Black friends there, and I appreciate Malcolm

doing his best to make sure I don't leave my Blackness there with them. If he knew about SLAY, if he'd just give the game a chance, he might realize just how proud I am of us. But I can see the whole conversation now. He'd ask me why I've poured so much effort into a video game when I could be focusing on college prep and getting a good job, so I don't join what he is constantly reminding me of: the mass of Black people who waste their lives on video games, junk food, drugs, unemployment, baby daddy drama, and child support. According to him, video games are distractions promoted by white society to slowly erode the focus and ambition of Black men. He wouldn't understand.

"I'm sorry," I admit. If I was doing the telephone voice, I didn't mean to.

He grins and rubs his nose against mine.

"Now, about me coming over tonight."

I know in my head that I can't actually have him over to my house tonight, but the way he says it . . .

I bite my lip and smile. Malcolm is fine as hell, and he knows I know it. We're lucky—his parents don't care what he does or where he goes, and my parents don't mind giving us privacy at the house, since they'd rather we be there than at "some drunken party," as Mom puts it.

Not sure what kinds of drunken parties she thinks are going down here at Jefferson. If people are throwing them, Malcolm and I are never invited.

"I have homework," I say. It's not a complete lie. I do have homework. There's a math test next week on polynomials that's going to kick my ass if I don't get it together and start studying.

"Can I help?"

He knows damn well if he came over, we wouldn't be studying anything but each other.

"It's American history," I lie. His least favorite subject. It's the only way to keep him away from the house while I immerse myself in the game. As far as Malcolm is concerned, American history is white history, and therefore antiBlack.

"You actually study for that shit?"

"I study so my final transcript doesn't disappoint Spelman. Even if they admit me, if my final grades are too low and they change their mind, Atlanta won't be a thing for us."

That's it, Kiera, I think, guilt-trip him.

"Fine, whatever." He shrugs. "I've got some decolonizing to do anyway. S'called The 48 Laws of Power. Robert Greene. You heard of it?"

By "decolonizing," he means reading. Knowing Malcolm, the book is written by a Black man

about Black men getting their education, starting their own businesses, becoming the heads of households, and raising gorgeous little Black children with their gorgeous Black queens. Malcolm's happily ever after. He'll stay up all night reading books like that. I can't complain about it, though—there's something sexy about a strong, stoic boy who reads a lot. But he only reads books by Black men, Black women who edify Black men, and white men who reinforce his non-race-related philosophies, leaving me to keep my Cline and Le Guin to myself.

I laugh at the irony of all those conversation-ending texts I get saying he's going to go "decolonize," leaving me to play SLAY uninterrupted.

"Well, maybe I should read it to you sometime," he says, leaning in close and whispering in my ear. "Maybe right before I put you to sleep."

I roll my eyes, but his game is working. My whole body is screaming to let him come over tonight. The duel starts in fifteen minutes, which means it might be over by the time he reaches my house. That should give us a couple of hours together before Mom gets home. Just because my parents are lax about us having sex in the house doesn't mean we want them hearing us.

But just before I can give in, Malcolm is backing away from me.

"But I'll leave you to your homework," he says, hands up comically with that big, goofy smile of his. "Just let me know when I can come over. I want to worship my queen."

And he winks and turns away, shrinking farther and farther down the hall among the rest of the students clustered in groups to gossip before whatever after-school clubs they might have. I sigh, wishing so badly that I could invite him into the game with me. His attitude and curiosity would make him an expert dueler. I don't know if I'll ever convince him that SLAY is different. To him, video games may be a distraction from becoming great, but I meant for it to do the exact opposite: to showcase how awesome we are as Black people, how multifaceted, resilient, and colorful we are. And I've tried hypothetical questions with him, like What if someone made a game that was just for Black people? but he doesn't even entertain the idea. "They make things 'just for us' all the time—we've got Black movies and Black History Month. They give us our own shit to distract us from the fact that we don't have control over their shit. Separate is not equal. That doesn't even come close to leveling the field."

He'll never get it. It's whatever. I've just decided to stop bringing it up.

At least, at last, I'm finally free to go home. I clip my backpack across my chest and race down the Jefferson front steps, past the students clustering in their cliques, past the kids waiting for their parents to pick them up.

My house is just down the street from the school, so I walk home most days. It gets annoying sometimes, living so close. Game days make traffic on our street a nightmare.

But I can't complain about the neighborhood. Bellevue, Washington, is one of the cleanest cities I've ever seen, in real life or on TV. Perfectly manicured trees line every public sidewalk, like they do at Disneyland, and I haven't seen a pothole since we moved here from SoDo—that's

“south downtown”—three years ago, when Dad got promoted. Lucky for me, it happened shortly after Malcolm got expelled, and I got to follow him out here to Jefferson, which I love and hate. I love that I can charge these kids sixty dollars a session to tutor them in math. It’s a nice addition to my résumé, and it gives me extra cash to spend on RAM, server maintenance, and in-game artwork. But I hate, and I mean hate, being “the voice of Blackness” here. At Belmont, where 50 percent of the students are Black, and 70 percent are people of color, Malcolm and I got to be normal. Nobody was asking to touch my twist-out, nobody was asking him about his locs, and nobody was asking us for permission to appropriate Black culture as if we’re the authority for our entire race.

I take in the fresh air. It’s only Thursday, and if I’m going to get through the rest of this week, the rest of this semester, and graduate, I’m going to have to stay calm and focus on my homework. I’ll be out of here, and hopefully into Spelman, soon enough.

I reach our little gray house at the end of the cul-de-sac that caps Newberg Lane. It’s smaller than most of the houses on this street, but it still doesn’t feel like home. Not like our home in SoDo anyway. This new house has two obnoxious white pillars on either side of the front door, and a wreath, and a peephole.

I notice a new decoration on the porch—a stuffed rabbit doll made of pink tube socks, sticks, and various brightly colored plastic eggs. That wasn’t here when I left for school this morning. Mom is clearly home early, and in a decorating mood, which means she’s going to ask me for help. Good thing I didn’t invite Malcolm over.

I mentally prepare myself for the encounter, since I have to get through it quick. Then I pull my keys out of my backpack’s water bottle compartment, unlock the front door, and swing it open.

“Mom?” I ask.

“We’re in the dining room!” I hear Steph from the other side of the house, since she had a five-minute head start on me. A much quieter voice mumbles something, and I assume it’s Mom reminding Steph not to yell in the house, even though no one’s home but the three of us.

I carefully untie my shoes and carry them with me into the kitchen, where I keep my shoe toothbrush in the pen drawer, so nobody will confuse it for a mouth toothbrush. I don’t know why I’m so particular about keeping my white shoes white. They’re just Keds. Not like they’re a pair of two-hundred-dollar Yeezys a lot of other Jefferson kids have. But it still irks me when they get dirty.

I find Mom and Steph sitting at the dining table, which always has eight place mats and a seasonal centerpiece, just in case Mom ever wants to throw a spontaneous dinner party. Although with her new schedule at the dental clinic, I doubt she’ll ever really have time. She and Steph are hard at work poking pink and yellow plastic gerbera stems into a horn-shaped white basket in the center of the table and eating popcorn.

“Hey!” exclaims Steph. She looks up at me through new red glasses—apparently, she’s already bored of the green ones she was wearing earlier. These ones are as big around as baseballs,



with the lenses punched out. Mine are boring black frames, with prescription lenses. Simple.

“Hey.” Mom smiles up at me.

“You’re home early,” I say.

“I finished with my last patient and they told me they were okay for the rest of the day, probably because of that billboard we put up last year reminding people to brush twice a day. I told y’all it was a good idea,” says Mom, tossing a few kernels of popcorn into her mouth.

“Haven’t you also been telling people to avoid hard candy, caramel, and popcorn?” Steph asks, reaching for another handful and widening her eyes and smiling playfully across the table.

“I know optometrists who stare at their cell phones all day, and I know doctors who eat peach cobbler,” says Mom with a grin, sliding the bowl closer to herself and grabbing a huge handful. She shrugs and looks up at me.

“Sit down with us and have some, Kiera. We’re decorating, if you want to join us.” Mom pulls out the empty chair between them at the head of the table.

“No thanks,” I say as politely as I can. “I have homework. Steph, I thought you were coming home early to work on posters.”

Steph wrinkles her nose playfully at me and glances at Mom.

“I can’t have a snack first?” she asks, and shoves another handful of popcorn into her mouth.

She’s staring at me with one eye narrowed, which means she’s analyzing me. It’s like she can see exactly what I’m thinking. Since I’m the worst at maintaining a poker face, I reach for the bowl of popcorn and toss a few kernels into my mouth. They’re buttery and salty, and I think Mom used some of that cheese powder her assistant, Karen, got us for Christmas last year. But Steph isn’t letting me off that easy. She’s still staring at me.

“Why do you ask?” she pries.

“No reason,” I say, just as my phone buzzes with a text.

“You expecting someone? Maybe a certain someone? A certain Hotep whose name I won’t mention?”

She calls Malcolm a Hotep, which, in her mind, is a brotha who claims he’s for Black power, when he’s really for Black male power, homophobia, misogyny, and other regressive ideologies. I say as long as Malcolm is encouraging our people to do better, and me to do better, I can’t complain, even if he says a few off-color things every so often. He may not “get” feminism all the way yet, but he’s a work in progress.

I deflect her question. “Jealousy ain’t cute, Steph.”

“Don’t say ain’t in my house,” says Mom with raised brows.

I made “Ain’t” a card in the game, since Ebonics is part of what differentiates the American Black experience from American “other” experiences. It’s ours. And I’ll use the word “ain’t” however I please as soon as I log in.

But my mom’s raised eyebrows ain’t playing. “Boo-Boo the Fool” is another card in the game. It’s a Battle card, since “Do I look like Boo-Boo the Fool?” is a rhetorical question that essentially translates to “I wasn’t born yesterday.” It’s a challenge to say something else and see what happens, and so are raised eyebrows, which is why the card features an artistic rendition of my mom’s. But as long as my mom still feels the need to “correct” Ebonics, like when we say words like “ain’t,” she’ll never see the card, or the game. She’d just be disappointed.

It’s not that I don’t get why she does it. She doesn’t want us to walk into a job interview one day with “Ay, bruh, I ain’t got much ’sperience, but I’ma do what I gotta do to get the job done, you feel me, cuz?” but Steph and I know how to alternate. It’s like speaking two different languages. One when I’m home, FaceTiming Malcolm, and one when I’m at Jefferson, blending in. I can do both flawlessly. But some nagging fear in the back of my mom’s mind thinks that if she doesn’t snuff out every “finna” and “talmbout” and “I’on,” Steph and I will be forever unemployable, and every dime she’s spent at Jefferson will go down the drain.

“Yes, Mom,” I say, pulling my phone out and stealing a glance at the screen. A new text from Malcolm.

Malcolm: See you tomorrow. Until then, listen to this and miss me.

He attached a new song by the Weeknd—that one that was nice and slow that I suggested we make love to. Why does he insist on teasing me like this when he knows he can’t come over tonight? I let out a frustrated sigh and look back up at Mom and Steph.

Steph is looking at me with a smirk now, and I’m sure she knows it’s Malcolm. She changes the subject, and I’m grateful, but the new topic she chooses is one I’ve heard a thousand times.

“Did you notice my new glasses?”

I nod. “Red looks nice on you.”

“Thanks!” she beams, rolling up both sleeves of her tight pink sweater.

Mom leans in closer to Steph, examining her glasses extra close, so close that Steph actually leans backward a bit.

“Is that . . . Scotch tape?” asks Mom.

“They’re from Goodwill,” explains Steph with a shrug as she picks up a big green leaf and nestles it in the basket. “But they broke in my purse on the way home. Had to fix ’em somehow.”

“You couldn’t find another pair of red glasses?” asks Mom.

“Not ones that look like the ones from Rihanna’s music video. I may go to Jefferson, but I’m not about to spend Jefferson money on glasses.”

I smile at that. Steph and I have our frugality in common, although mine is mostly based on the fact that I use every last dime I can find to maintain the game.

“But Scotch tape, Steph? Really,” says Mom. “You could find a nice new pair on Amazon that doesn’t look so . . .”

Steph leans back against her chair and folds her arms over her chest, challenging Mom to finish the sentence.

“Tacky,” says Mom. I know she’s avoiding the word “ghetto,” after Steph’s lecture to the family last week about how “ghetto” is just a derogatory code word for innovative. “I just don’t want those kids at Jefferson ostracizing you and your sister.”

Too late for that.

“I get it, Mom,” replies Steph. “But I genuinely don’t care. If I wear red tape-covered glasses, quote lyrics from The Chronic regularly, and speak in AAVE, and that’s enough to get me ostracized, it’s going to happen no matter what I do.”

Okay, I have to ask. “What’s AAVE?”

“Oh, please don’t get her started,” sighs Mom, looking up at me like I just asked Steph to recite the Gettysburg Address for us.

“No, Mom, this is important. Kiera needs to hear this. It stands for African American Vernacular English, and—”

“Actually,” I say, glancing back at my phone. It’s already 3:08. I have seven minutes to log in. “Sorry I asked. I need to get to studying. Biology exam tomorrow.”

I turn to leave through the kitchen just as Steph launches into, “Okay, we’ll talk later, though, right? This is important!” at a thousand decibels, after which comes a swift shhhhhhh from Mom to remind her not to yell in the house.

When I get to my room, I lock the door and run to my computer chair. When I log in, there are 641 new DMs in my SLAY inbox. That’s the name of the game—SLAY. It’s not an acronym, although that’s always the first question of anyone who joins, and people have been offering suggestions for acronyms ever since its launch. It’s a double entendre, meaning both “to greatly impress” and “to annihilate.” I thought the name was more than appropriate for a turn-based VR card game where players go head-to-head in card duels using elements of Black culture. Steph would love it if she ever knew about it. Or if she knew I was the developer. But for all the

confidence I have in my sister, one thing she absolutely can't do is keep a secret. And on top of that, her constant jabs at Malcolm make me wonder if she'd get the game. There are players from all over the world, all walks of life, many who grew up poor like Malcolm, regularly "decolonize" like Malcolm, and surround themselves with specific kinds of Black influences, like Malcolm. I don't know if I can share SLAY with her, because I don't know if she'll accept it—all of it. Not without overthinking it. So I won't. Probably not ever.

I scan the messages for anything important, like major game glitches. I don't want people to miss the semifinals because of technical problems. Most of them are asking what time the duel begins, even though I put a section clearly marked Duel Calendar in the navigation panel on the left side of the screen, the panel that you have to look at whenever you're configuring your character.

I roll my eyes at the willful ignorance and glance at the clock. Five minutes till duel. I'll read the rest of the messages later. I unlock the bottom drawer of my desk and pull out my headphones, and the gray VR socks, gloves, and goggles my family doesn't know I bought.

My heart pounds as I slip them on. I can't wait until I go off to Spelman so I can play with a noise-canceling headset. For now, I have to listen for my mom yelling through the door that it's dinnertime, so I can say five more minutes and deflect suspicion.

I log in and my pulse races as I watch my logo appear in brilliant green all caps against a black background. SLAY, it says on the screen inside my goggles.

I get up and stand in the middle of my room so I don't knock anything over. All I keep in my room are my bunk bed with the sofa on the bottom, my bookcase, my dresser, my pouf, my desk in the corner by the door. When it comes to VR, the less furniture around me, the safer. Come on, come on, I urge as the map fills the screen. It's nighttime in this region—the Tundra—so the navy skybox is up, almost black, peppered with shimmering stars. I look up and around at them all, and suddenly I miss all those summer nights Malcolm and I used to lie in my backyard in SoDo and watch what little of the night sky the city smog would leave us. Nights when we got to shut out the rest of the world and just be ourselves, swapping music, talking about which Black genius's opinions he was reading that day. I captured several of his favorites in SLAY—Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, and Langston Hughes.

I left my character, Emerald, here in the Tundra so it would be easier to get to the duel. The snowy mountains contrast nicely against the sky, spiking upward in a basin all around me. I raise my hand to slide the virtual keyboard from the right side of the screen, type Fairbanks Arena using the holographic keys, point my left hand to the north, and pull my trigger finger, allowing me to teleport at light speed. New players might think I named the arena after Fairbanks, Alaska, but the information panel would tell them I actually named it after Mabel Fairbanks, one of the first Black professional figure skaters.

Mountains zoom past me. I smile, impressed at how good they look up close. I was having a fantastic day when I created the Tundra. The textures are flawless—smooth and realistic. The snow looks fluffy up close. Every mountain looks hand-painted, thanks to donated art from a few indie artists who SLAY. I built the arena itself entirely of diamonds, because I could, and

because a diamond arena in an icy region is hella dope. It's one of the biggest, too. It can hold three million people, since I hope one day the game gets that big.

For now, chat reads over a hundred thousand logged-in people out of the five hundred thousand people with SLAY accounts, which is still a lot for a single duel, even if it's the semifinal round of a tournament, but I guess it's prime time for people my age to be online, at least here on the West Coast. I'm close enough to see the people forming a line into the arena now. I slow my pace and I'm flying smoothly over all the attendees. Most players choose to be either royalty or characters with special powers or weapons. I descend to the ground and join them, walking in place in my room to make Emerald move.

A few people recognize me and step aside.

"It's Queen Emerald!" says the text over the head of an especially tall woman in a bloodred strapless gown with a fifty-foot train flowing behind her. Her wrists have golden bracelets up to her elbows, and her neck has similar ones. Her hair is twisted up into an enormous bulb on top of her head, with a huge golden crown encircling it, a giant ruby as wide as her torso set right in the middle.

At first I tried to make the dresses realistic and material, but it was causing problems when people would step on the trains, veils, and robes, and keep characters from walking smoothly. So she's wearing a dress that's immaterial, meaning the fabric will go right through other players and objects without obstruction, a weird concept—based on collision physics—to think about when you're talking to her face-to-face.

A woman in bone armor notices me and takes a fighting stance. Her unnaturally large boobs and red headband around her enormous Afro make her look like a Mortal Kombat character.

Text appears above her head. "I hope you got my message, Emerald. We meet at dawn."

Everyone says, "We meet at dawn." It's how we say, "I challenge you to a duel at a later time." In fact, it's become an identifier in the real world. About a year ago, kids in the grocery store started coming up to me and asking, "Did you thaw the meat?" or "Did you get the meat?" or "Do you eat meat?" and after some perusing in chat, I realized it's a coded question. They ask pretty much any question involving meat, to which I'm supposed to reply, "We meet at dawn" if I want them to know I SLAY.

When Reddit first launched, it was so secretive that Redditors in real life used to ask the highly conspicuous question "When does the narwhal bacon?" but I like our version better. It's more covert. "Did you thaw the meat?" is a totally normal question to ask. "When does the narwhal bacon?" will make people ask, "WTF are you Internet kids up to?" which is exactly what I don't want to happen. I know there are SLAYers who are just like me—who live one way during the day at work or school, and would rather their nonBlack classmates or coworkers not know they live completely differently online. Completely authentically.

I walk past the woman in bone armor and spot a character in a dark gray hooded robe that extends about thirty feet behind him. He's wielding a katana in each hand and has the words

JUSTICE FOR TRAYVON written across the back of his robe in bloodred. Not going to lie, his outfit is pretty legit. When text on clothing was enabled, I just wrote EMERALD down the leg of a lime-green jumpsuit I had stuffed in the back of my inventory. The text was impossible to line up with various articles of clothing, so I ended up giving up on the function, and now I'm wishing I'd written something meaningful instead of my name, because it'll be awhile before I'll have time to sort that feature out.

The entrance to Fairbanks Arena is everything I'd imagined a Hollywood movie premiere to be. Neon-blue and purple strobe lights are creating a faux aurora borealis across the night sky and across all sides of the building. At least I hope people recognize it's the aurora. It looks a little like a sloppy watercolor potion, which I guess is okay since this region is full of witches and magicians. It's much easier to mix potions when you live right next to the mines, where the crystals are—in yellow, blue, and pink.

The purple carpet leading up to the front steps only appears thirty minutes before a tournament duel, mostly to alert players in the area who don't check the schedule that a tournament duel is about to happen. Players can initiate a regular duel at any time, anywhere, by sending a request to any character they wish. But the tournament duels are where the real athletes come to play. Those are the duels that get spectators. I hike up my dress out of habit, since it's immaterial and poses no risk of tripping, and race up the steps. My green gown flies behind me, and I pound the + button on my virtual screen, allowing my character to grow to ten times her size so people know I've arrived.

The minute I step through the front door, having to duck just to fit into the arena, the people in the stands roar to life. I look up and around the arena in awe. The stands reach so high into the rafters that I can't see the top on account of the light from the moon, which is directly above us in the night sky. Characters jump and scream, waving veils and scarves and jangling bracelets and jewelry. Anything to attract my attention. I can't stop looking around. Everyone's configured their characters to be different shades, from Zendaya to Lupita, and I am living for it. There's forehead jewelry and face paint, flowers, feathers, beads, glitter, Afros the size of small vehicles and braids as long and thick as pythons. I spot dashikis, Mursi lip plates, otjize clay, Ulwaluko blankets, Marley twists, Michael Jackson's glove, and a man in a purple cape twice as tall as me in the front row who's trying a little too hard to be Prince. And this splendor, this orchestra of Black magnificence, extends all the way up to the ceiling, beyond my vision.

Steph would cry tears of joy if she could see this.

To make my way up the steps to the middle of the arena, I march my VR-socked feet against my rug—the rug I asked for last Christmas to cover up the sound of me dueling. In the middle of my bedroom, I raise my gloved hand and Emerald's hand shoots up in the air. The conversations of over a hundred thousand people dissipate into immediate silence. I don't think I'll ever get tired of that satisfaction.

I raise my index finger and see the virtual white-gloved hand slide my virtual keyboard from the right side of my screen.

"Welcome, kings and queens," the text above my head reads. I wish I could use a mic, but

there's no way I'd be able to keep up the whole "secret identity" thing in a house with walls this thin. The crowds roar to life again, and I keep typing.

"Tonight, we await a fierce match between two of the greatest magicians in the Tundra. Our very own civil war."

The applause doesn't stop. So many people so excited to be here. I can't even.

"In one corner of the ring—some call her a Voodoo queen, some call her a dark witch, and others just call her the Shadow. Please welcome . . . Zama!"

I extend my hand toward the Western Gate as a cacophony of cheers and boos melds into an uproar. Zama speeds from the gate under a bear-size wolf pelt with her head tucked down low and bare arms extended like airplane wings. Her tail extends twenty feet behind her as she glides across the arena floor and around the ring. She runs as gracefully as a bird flies, so fast that the whole pelt stays off the ground. Her fans—mostly from the front rows—erupt into soulful howls that echo all the way up to the invisible ceiling. Zama finally turns and races up the steps to the ring where I am, and raises her hands to her worshippers, who continue to howl their respect.

I've seen Zama duel before. She must be a professional martial artist in real life, with access to an entire gymnasium of space, because she can flip across the whole arena and roundhouse-kick her opponents clean out of the ring. Once, in the Rain Forest region, I saw her leap into the air, grab a vine that was hanging in a loop above the arena, and ninja-kick her opponent hard enough to knock six hundred points off the board in a single blow. Her agility and mastery of the cards earned her immediate popularity in SLAY, and now that she's climbed the ranks to the top of the Tundra warriors roster, her fans have crossed over from a fan base to a cult following.

"And in the other corner," I type, "we have a wild card of a warrior. They're mighty, they're unpredictable, and they have a whole book of tricks up their sleeve. Please welcome PrestoBox!"

More applause and booing as I gesture to the Eastern Gate, where a black disk emerges and slides across the floor. It's like a shadow, but with nothing creating it. It slides right up the steps, headed straight for me. Just as I think it's going to stop, it slides underneath me. I glance over my shoulder as it emerges from under my sparkly green train and stops beside me. The cheering hasn't stopped, and it hums louder as a mountain of black lumps rises slowly from the disk, which is shrinking. The lumps slowly take shape into shoulders and a head. Then a face forms—one with a Guy Fawkes mask and a black Zorro hat—they look a bit like No Face from Spirited Away. The body is just a nondescript black cloak, concealing whatever tricks lie underneath. I've never seen Presto duel before, but I know rumors have been circulating about them since they joined six months ago. Presto has been accused of hacking because they've discovered spells so rare that Cicada was convinced nobody would ever figure them out. To create a spell in SLAY, you have to find specific ingredients, combine them in your inventory in a specific order to make a spell base, and enter codes to add certain qualities to the spell so you can actually use it. Presto managed to unlock a spell that allows you to fly—or more accurately, hover—and everyone flipped out and assumed that since no one had seen it before,

it couldn't be real. But it's very real. To get it, you have to combine a Pink Crystal from the Tundra region, an Ostrich Feather from the Savanna region, and a rare Foxblood Flower from the Forest region. Then you have to find four numbers on the back of a framed photo in one of the pyramids in the Desert region and enter them into the spell code box backward. Cicada's idea. She wanted the coolest spells—the ones that let you teleport, see through walls, become invisible, levitate objects, and summon thunder—to be almost impossible to figure out. But they're very real, just waiting for players to discover them, and of all the spellmasters I've seen duel, Presto has the most potential to find them first. PrestoBox is silent and makes no movement, so I begin typing again.

Before I can enter my next sentence, a loud thunderclap explodes through the arena and a shadow appears over the ring, startling even me. I gasp and suddenly hope my mom didn't hear me from the hall. PrestoBox has raised their arms and thrown their cape fifty feet in all directions above my head and Zama's, consuming us in darkness. I look over at PrestoBox, who has revealed their body underneath the cape. They're wearing the standard black stretchy shorts that every character gets by default, since we can't have characters walking around naked, and they have gorgeous skin, the color of raw umber, with white body paint made to look like a skeleton from neck to toes.

The crowd can't get enough. If PrestoBox had fans before walking in here, they have at least double that now.

As quickly as they'd flung the cloak over the whole ring, they retract it, sucking it into their body like a Shop-Vac sucking up motor oil. PrestoBox takes a bow and raises a black lump to the crowd in a wave. I grin at their style, which has turned out to be as magnificent as their reputation.

I click enter.

"Kings and queens, you know the drill. We are here first and foremost to celebrate Black excellence in all its forms, from all parts of the globe. We are different ages, genders, tribes, tongues, and traditions. But tonight, we are all Black. And tonight, we all SLAY."

I raise my right arm for dramatic effect, and the audience members jump up and down in their seats. A shrill voice in the front screams, "I love you, Zama!"

"The rules of duel engagement are simple," I type. "Each dueler will draw six cards—two Battle cards, two Hex cards, and two Defense cards. Once the cards are drawn, duelers will have ten seconds to determine the order in which they want to use their cards. Duelers will fight using two cards each per round, in any combination they choose. In regular duels, Dueler One will launch attacks at the same time as Dueler Two. But because this is the Tundra Semifinals, and because luck makes everything more interesting, for this match, the dueler who draws the higher initial card will be allowed to use their first two cards five seconds before their opponent in round one. Defense cards beat Battle cards. Battle cards beat Hex cards. In rounds two and three, duelers will launch attacks at the same time, as per normal duel rules. The scores will appear on the Megaboard as the game progresses, and the drums will signal the beginning and end of each round. Is everybody ready?"



More cheering and hollering from the crowd. Everyone is so hyped for this online world. I wonder how many of these people ran home from school just to log on and watch.

“Duelers,” I type, “face your opponent.”

Zama and PrestoBox turn to stare each other down as I navigate to my inventory and pull out the deck of gold-plated cards. They come in three colors—Hex are purple, Battle are red, and Defense are blue. For the initial draw—the one that determines which dueler will go first—I keep them scrambled. I hold my arms out on either side of me, right here in my room, and watch the virtual cards shuffle theatrically through the air over my head in a shimmering arch. I look up, spinning them in all directions until they fall like a stack of leaves neatly into my hand. The crowd has gone silent as I whip my arm in front of me, casting the cards across the ring until they’re sucked up into two piles, one at the feet of Zama, and one at the feet of PrestoBox.

“Duelers, draw your initial card to determine who will go first.”

PrestoBox levitates their card into the air and flips it over so I can see it.

“It’s the Innovation card!” I announce. I look at the Megaboard behind me, a TV screen the size of a football field floating in midair. PrestoBox’s Innovation card appears enormously, in great detail, on the screen. The light bulb pictured in the middle of the card is another donated piece of artwork. It’s a Hex card, the lowest ranking of the three categories. Zama draws a card from the top of her deck, glances at it, and then hands it to me.

“It’s the Representation card!” I declare, watching the card appear on the Megaboard with the image of three identical silhouettes, since it duplicates the dueler times three. “A Defense card! Zama goes first.”

An eruption of howls from Zama’s fans drowns out the applause and booing. Zama and PrestoBox continue to stare at each other. I point to the ceiling and pull my trigger finger lightly, pulling me up into the air like I have an invisible grappling gun. I watch the ring grow smaller below me as I type with my free hand.

“On my count, the duelers will have ten seconds to study their six cards—two Battle cards, two Hex cards, and two Defense cards.”

I arrive at my seat, which is high above the Megaboard where I can see a hundred more rows of stands. I programmed a holographic projection of the stage a hundred rows high so people too high up to see the floor can still see the match clearly. I prefer to watch from up here because it’s much quieter, and I can watch the match under the stars. It’s a game of strategy and timing. Zama and PrestoBox stare each other down like cats about to rip each other apart. Each has three stacks of cards at their feet—one red, one blue, and one purple, all with that iconic SLAY golden trim.

“Ready?” I type as I gather my gown around my feet and sink into my thronelike chair, which would fit two of me. “Go!”

Zama kneels, snatches up her deck, and flings cards one by one onto the ground in a two-by-three formation, faceup. PrestoBox's cards move on their own, six arranging themselves in the same way.

The Megaboard counts down from 10 . . . 9 . . . 8 . . .

Zama studies her cards and slides all six of them around on the ground in front of her. Presto calmly moves just two of theirs to different positions. Both duelers can see their own cards clearly—the titles, the stats, and the artwork. But Cicada and I figured out pretty fast that characters in the front rows could see some of the cards with more striking artwork, ruining the surprise. So to those of us who aren't dueling, including me, the cards look like solid gold rectangles. No text, no art, nothing. Not until Zama or Presto decide to use them.

The voices of a hundred thousand characters chant along with the Megaboard: "Three! . . . Two! . . . One!" And then those drums thunder through the whole place, signaling the end of Zama's and Presto's chance to study them. All twelve cards on the floor between them flip over, facedown. It's up to the duelers to remember the order they chose and be prepared to fight with them, two cards at a time.

"Duelers," I type, "have you studied your cards?"

Zama raises her fist and releases a mighty roar among the howls of her fans. PrestoBox lifts an amorphous lump from under their cloak and waves it up at me. I'll take that as a yes.

"Excellent," I type. I have the next part memorized now, but it took me forever to write at first, jotting down the words in notebooks, on napkins, and in my phone until they clicked perfectly. "These are the rules of tournament engagement: Using the unique powers indicated on each card, duelers will battle each other until their powers run out and they return to the state in which you see them now. Then we will progress to round two. The dueler left with the most points at the end of round three wins the match. Attacks in rapid succession are permitted—duelers may deal as many strikes as they want before the timer runs out and their powers disappear. Duelers may use items and spells during game play. The restrictions are few: in-game betting on opponents, hacking, lag mechanisms, and unapproved mods to characters, skills, and environments are strictly prohibited. In general, no—"

The audience yells it as my next text appears:

"Tomfoolery!"

I grin as I type the next part:

"And finally, remember that little queens and kings are watching. Opponents, respect each other in words and in actions. No trash talk. Let your skills speak for themselves. Now, are you ALL READY?!"

The crowd roars to life and Zama begins hopping up and down to loosen up. PrestoBox widens

their stance under their robe.

“Duelers! On my count, flip your first pair of cards! Ready? Three . . . two . . . one . . . Flip!”

Zama flips the two cards closest to her. Two cards flip on their own in front of PrestoBox. The four cards appear on the Megaboard, and I hurry to read their names so I can type.

“Zama has chosen the Gabby Douglas card and the Twist-Out card for a deadly combination. Very nice, but will it withstand PrestoBox’s selections, the Jimi Hendrix card and the Swerve card? We’ll find out in three! Two! One! And begin!”

Those drums thunder away through the arena.

Zama taps the Twist-Out card first, and her hair grows into two monstrous ropes as thick in diameter as Thanksgiving dinner plates, ropes that deal no damage but can render the opponent immobile if they catch them. They fly straight for PrestoBox, who ducks and rolls out of the way, just barely escaping their grasp in time as the two ropes untwist into four. Presto reaches their hand out from under the inky black cloak and touches the Jimi Hendrix card, and an electric purple haze falls over the ring, descending from the sky like a tropical rain. I debated between calling this one the Jimi Hendrix card after his song “Purple Haze” or the Prince card in honor of “Purple Rain,” but in the end, it looked more like a “Purple Haze” to me, and since it clouds the opponent’s vision by 75 percent, the name stuck.

Zama begins to stumble amid the violet fog. The crowd is loving this, and I’m loving it along with them. Even though I have all the cards’ stats memorized since I wrote most of them, I never know for sure how a match will end. The outcome depends on so many factors besides luck of the draw—aggressiveness, patience, reverse psychology, game theory, character strength, and frankly, how skilled the person behind the character is at using VR equipment. It’s impossible to tell who has the upper hand, and I realize I’m holding my breath.

Zama’s untwisted ringlets split into a flailing spiral of fifty locks of hair. The crowd gasps as all tendrils zoom straight at PrestoBox, who can’t escape them this time. Presto is sucked up into a jet-black bouquet of gorgeous natural hair that I’m envious of. My twist-outs have been stuck at my shoulders since junior high. Presto squirms fruitlessly as Zama leaps forward into a handspring with one of her hands on the Gabby Douglas card, and her feet follow effortlessly. She tumbles and flips across the ring with such speed and strength that people are rising out of their chairs in awe. A swift roundhouse to the face sends PrestoBox flying mask-first into the ground.

I gasp and realize I’m clenching my fists, and then I take a deep breath and remind myself that none of this is real, and that Presto isn’t really hurt, and that my animations are just that realistic. I steal a glance at the Megaboard. That blow gave Zama a whopping twelve-hundred-point lead.

“Come on, Presto,” I urge. My heart skips as I realize I’ve said it in real life, and I lift one headphone to listen to the quiet of my room, just to make sure Mom hasn’t heard me.

PrestoBox is off the ground, tapping their second, and last, round one card—the Swerve card,

one of my favorites, marked by a black steering wheel as the artwork, since it comes from the expression “swerve,” which means “step off” or “stay in your lane.” It blocks 80 percent of opponent damage. To use this as a round three card usually means the player has given up on offense and they want to block as much damage as possible in a last-ditch effort to stay in the game. Using the Swerve card in round one means Presto anticipated Zama would take the offensive out the gate and is giving themselves time to catch up. The crowd erupts in boos, and Zama shrugs, circling the ring with a raised hand to calm her supporters down. Her twist-out is still billowing behind her. With Zama’s back to the ring, PrestoBox glides across the floor in her direction. I smirk at Zama’s carelessness. We’re only two minutes into round one, with sixty seconds left. There’s no way she should be this confident yet. If there’s one thing that’ll get you flattened in the ring, it’s pride.

Presto leaps through Zama’s hair tentacles and engulfs her in that inky black cloak until both duelers are a tangle of hair, wolf pelt, and shadowy blackness under a purple haze. I can barely make out anything through all that, so I watch the Megaboard as Presto’s points tick up and up and up. Three hundred, four hundred, five fifty, six fifty. It’s thirteen hundred to eight hundred as Zama breaks free and sics her hair on PrestoBox again. Presto reverts to shadow form, sinking into the floor until they’re a pool of black zipping all over the ring. Zama’s eyes can’t keep up, and she looks ridiculous tap-dancing around in her regal wolf cloak to keep her feet away from the shadow.

I can’t help it—I burst into laughter.

My mom’s voice comes instantly.

“Honey, I hope you’re studying in there,” she calls.

“Yeah,” I holler, probably a little too fast. “I’m just taking a quick break.”

“Well, dinner’s almost ready anyway. You can take a break with us.”

“Is Dad home already?” I exclaim. It can’t be. It’s only—

I glance at the clock in the corner of my navigation panel. 3:45. What in the world is Dad doing home so early on a random Thursday?! Why, of all days, did both my parents decide to show up early from work today? I’m only halfway through round one of the Tundra Semifinals. I can’t just leave!

PrestoBox is flipping Zama over their shoulder now and slamming her flat on the ground. It’s time for me to chime in again. I begin typing and talking at the same time, which is always dangerous. I type: “A spectacular move by PrestoBox! What a show!” at the same time as I say, “Fine, just let me finish this show,” instead of what I meant to say: Fine, just let me finish this assignment. I scramble to correct myself. “I’m writing a report on The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air and its impact on Black culture in the nineties. I’m kind of in the middle of a train of thought here.”

“Yes, well, you won’t be able to think if you don’t get some nourishment,” calls Mom.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say begrudgingly, knowing a fight with my mom over dinner will not end in my favor. I listen to the ensuing silence until I’m sure she’s gone, and then I focus back in on the match. Zama is swinging her staff, knocking away sickle-shaped darts flying out from under PrestoBox’s cloak. We’re nearing the end of round one, and the Megaboard reads 1500–1300, with Zama in the lead. It’s so close, but there’s no way I’ll make it through to the end of round three without Mom pounding angrily at my door with the news that dinner is getting cold.

I call in the only reinforcement I can count on: Cicada.

I slide my chat panel out on my VR screen and open a private convo with her, relieved to find her name lit up in green.

Me: Please tell me you’re watching this.

Cicada: Zama and Presto? It’s past midnight here and I have a final exam tomorrow. In other words, wouldn’t miss it. :)

I smile. I don’t know where Cicada lives, but she’s somewhere in the Central European Time Zone, putting her somewhere south of Norway and north of Nigeria, which doesn’t narrow it down much. I don’t know a lot about her, really, since most of our conversations are strictly business—related to game updates, new cards, landscape artwork, or server maintenance—but I know that I can trust her. She’s been on this SLAY train since the beginning, faithfully moderating matches when I can’t, and it works, since she’s somewhere on the other side of the world. She’s awake when I’m not.

I type a reply into our private chat box.

Me: Thank God. Listen, it’s dinnertime and if I don’t get out there soon, my mom is going to have a liter of kittens.

Cicada: Spell-check? Or did your mom take “Kittens in a Blender” too literally?

I manage to contain a laugh and send a crying laughing emoji right back, and a grateful IOU a major one.

Then I navigate back to my announcement panel and type to the masses just as Zama reciprocates PrestoBox’s earlier body slam.

“Attention, lovely kings and queens, I leave you in the capable hands of Cicada. Be conscious, and be well.”

I don’t want to log off. The score is tied 1700–1700, and Zama’s hair is weakening its grip from around Presto’s amorphous form. The purple haze is fading. Round one is ending in a tie. The crowd is roaring as the imminence of round two sinks in. I see Cicada’s name light up in the stands on the opposite side of the arena, and freestanding, glowing white text appears above her bald head in a floating holographic speech bubble. It says “What a maneuver! Moves like

that only come from the Tundra, am I right, kings and queens?”

I love her gown. It's all white, off shoulder with white fur lining the neckline. A single strip of black fur lines the hood, which is pulled elegantly over her head. Her face is actually devoid of makeup. She just has the base-model face. But sometimes, if she's feeling spunky, she'll don the Princess Mononoke mask—the red and white one with the brown eyes. So badass. She's sitting in the stands, so I can only see her from the torso up, but I've seen the gown in all its glory before. She looks like an ice princess. I wonder if she's bald in real life too.

“Kiera!”

The yell makes me jump, and I scramble to log out, kill the power, yank off my headphones, headset, and gloves, hop across my carpet as I pull off one sock at a time, and get all my equipment back into the drawer before the knocking starts.

“Hold on!” I holler. I try to keep my keys as quiet as possible while I lock the bottom drawer.

“Dinner is getting cold!”

“I know, just—” I'm trying to catch my breath after being startled, so I don't emerge from my room a raging ball of nerves. I'm already sweaty from the excitement of the match. I don't want to look like I've just run a marathon while I'm supposed to be watching Fresh Prince.

“Just, get started without me. I'll be out in five.”

“If you think you're going to leave your father and me to listen to this rant about African American Vernacular English by ourselves, you've got another think coming.”

I smile and shake my head, wiping the sweat from my forehead and turning off my computer. As I open my door and follow Mom down the hall toward the dining room, I wonder which cards Zama and Presto will be using in round two.