

CAMERON BATTLE

AND THE
HIDDEN KINGDOMS



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The Three Gifts

Igbo Mountains

Asaba

Palacia

Sanaga Forest

Onitsha

The Noble Road

Supernatural Forest

Okeniyi

Temple to Idemmili

ATLANTIC OCEAN



Georgia, U.S.



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W

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Efk



Igbo Mountains

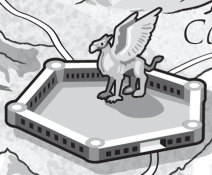


Cave of Shadows

Animal Court



Ibibio



Gate



Desert



The Noble Road



Owerri



Crystal City



Igboland

Nigeria, Africa



CHAPTER ONE

I forgot my umbrella.

My best friend Zion hadn't.

Raindrops splattered all over my jacket, trousers, and my favorite all-red Converse Chucks as I scrambled off Grady Elementary's school bus. "Hey, Zion. Let me underneath your umbrella? I don't have mine."

"Nope!" Zion said, falling into step with me as we walked the neighborhood streets leading to Grandma's house. "I told you to bring yours this morning when you called me. You decided not to listen. Your fault." He removed a small package of Skittles from his pocket and popped a green one in his mouth, laughing as he did. His stomach poked out from his light jacket.

I rolled my eyes. "Come on, Zion. *Please?*" I faked a sweet smile. "Don't forget, I'm wearing your favorite trousers today." We wore each other's clothing often.

Zion sucked his teeth, his brown curls bouncing as he shook his head. “Nope!” His curls were damp, as opposed to my soaking wet, coily hair. “And you mean . . . *your* trousers now that they’re drenched.”

Groaning, I took off my jacket and wrapped it around my head. Grandma had told me this morning, with a far-away look as she stared out the kitchen window, that it might rain, but I hadn’t listened to her or Zion. I was under the false impression that summers in Atlanta meant constant sunshine, not thunderous rain for days on end. “Things are changing, Cam,” she had said. “Our home ain’t the same as it used to be.”

Boom. Thunder rolled in the sky, the clouds opened even more, and the steady sheets of rain became a flood. It was almost like the weather had heard my thoughts.

“Great last day of school, huh?” Zion said. The water almost obscured his brown-skinned face, just a touch lighter than my own dark walnut-brown skin. Droplets of rain marred his black-rimmed glasses. I swatted water from my eyes, trying to see the neighborhood. Grandma’s house was set back on a dead-end road, so it was easy to miss it, especially when the weather was bad.

I squeezed my soaked shirt with my left hand.

“It doesn’t really feel like summer, does it?” Zion asked, shivering a bit and popping another Skittle in his mouth. I had to agree with him. The last few weeks had been nothing but miserable outside, forcing us inside. Everyone

knew that summer came early to Atlanta, but the weather lately had been more like winter, raining for almost a full month, the sky a constant dark gray, almost black. I even thought I had seen snowflakes drifting down to the ground just last week. I ran to show Grandma, but by the time we stepped outside into the backyard, it had all mysteriously disappeared. After that, Grandma made Zion and me stay in the house, a worried look crossing her face every time she caught us sneaking out to the woods surrounding her home.

To be fair, it was Zion who had convinced me to slip away, but she was quick enough to catch us every time.

“It hasn’t felt like summer in a long time,” I responded as we walked. “Did you text Aliyah about the sleepover?”

Zion looked annoyed. “Why did you have to invite her? This was supposed to be a Zion and Cam weekend sleepover. It’s been that way since we were six.”

A sigh escaped my mouth. “We’ve discussed this, Zion. She’s our friend, too. We all got close this year, so don’t act like you don’t love her, either. You’re always over at her house—*without me*, I might add—playing video games.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Zion muttered, shifting his backpack on his shoulders. “This is *tradition*. You don’t break tradition.” A hurt look bloomed on his face, but I ignored it. He’d get over it once Aliyah finally showed up; we were all the best of friends, but we hadn’t invited her to our weekly sleepovers yet until now.

Grandma and I lived in Underwood Hills, a neighborhood in Buckhead in Northern Atlanta. The small, cozy homes rose on each side of the sidewalk as we passed by. Kids jumped off school buses, spilling into the road and onto the pavement, talking in groups as if thunder hadn't just sounded in the sky. When we got to a stop sign about three hundred feet from our bus stop, we turned left.

A sly look passed through Zion's hazel eyes. "Speaking of tradition, we might as well—"

"Nope!" I said, mimicking Zion's high voice. "You know the attic is off-limits."

"It wasn't off-limits when—"

"It is," I said, cutting him off. "And we're not going up there, either."

"But why?" he whined. "We used to read *The Book of Chidani* all the time, you know . . . before. Remember the queen, her sister, and Chidani? It almost seemed . . . real every time we read it."

"I *know*. And remember the demons, the gods, the palace?"

"Please, please, Cam? It wouldn't hurt to just take *one* look."

We hadn't been to the attic in two years, not since I'd lost my parents to a car crash. What would a quick peek hurt? But still, Grandma had forbidden us to go up there. "No, Zion."

Zion grumbled underneath his breath. "Party pooper."

Grandma's brick house appeared at the top of the hill.

I touched Zion's shoulder and turned him around, ignoring the rain. "Listen. Don't bring up the *Book* with Aliyah. I'm serious. Grandma was clear when she locked it away."

"But reading it was our friend thing."

A twinge of sadness pierced my chest as I thought about Mama and Grandma reading it to me when I was younger. When I met Zion, he had joined in. It was something that had connected us even more. "I liked reading it, too. But rules are rules."

"Rules are meant to be broken, though," Zion said.

"I—" *Sizzle. Pop!*

Lightning struck the ground near where we stood, next to the apple tree in Grandma's backyard. We both jumped and screamed, covering our faces as the light filled our eyes. *What the . . . ?*

"What was that?" Zion said, clinging to me. A crack appeared in the sidewalk where the lightning had struck.

A dark shadow ran across my vision as I stared at Grandma's house. The rain shower stopped falling, as if someone had pressed pause. The apparition took on a monstrous, humanoid shape right next to the old shed in the backyard. It was dark, tall, and obscured by shadows.

"What is that—" I said, but my voice caught in my throat as the figure started to move toward us. I let out a squeak of fear as a memory tingled in my mind, but I wasn't able to fully capture it before I made a grab for Zion and yelled, "*Run!*"

My arm grasped only air as I ran toward the woods

surrounding Grandma's house. Zion ran far in front of me. I pumped my legs, burning with my every step, as a hissing sound came from behind me. *Don't look back, Cameron. Don't look back.*

I looked back anyway. The shadowy figure grew in size, surrounding me in smoke. As soon as I hit the covering of the trees, my sneakers became slick with grass and dirt, and my leg twisted on a branch. I yelped as I fell, the shadow moving closer as I grabbed at my leg. I tried to stand.

"Zion!" I cried out as the shadow *grew* legs, running toward me. I thought I could make out the word "book" coming from its nonexistent mouth as it barreled my way. The memory tingled again, so close yet too far away. The shadow got closer, and I shut my eyes, sure this was the end.

Pressure built under my armpits as I was pulled across the wet dirt. "Cameron, Cameron, Cameron!" Zion was saying. I struggled with the pressure, trying to fight as much as I could. I sent a punch upward.

"Ow! What did you do that for? Open your eyes!"

I sat blinking and took in my surroundings. Zion had moved us deeper into the woods, right near the pond behind Grandma's house. It had started to rain again, but at least the trees gave us some cover. I scrambled upward, looking around, breathing hard.

"Where is it?" I asked. "Where is it?"

"Where is what?" Zion asked, anger blossoming on his

face as he straightened his glasses and pulled out a cloth from his pocket. “You didn’t have to punch me!”

“What do you mean, *what?* You saw it!”

“Saw what?” Zion said. “I didn’t see anything. You said *run*, and that’s all I had to hear. You never, ever ask questions when someone tells you to run, especially when it’s coming from your best friend.”

I gestured around us, my heart still hammering. “I could’ve sworn I saw a shadow, smoke, something. It was running from Grandma’s house.”

By this time, Zion had cleaned his glasses, straightened them, and put them back on. “It was probably just a glare or the sky getting dark because of the rain. You really gotta stop this, Cam.”

“Stop what?”

Zion pushed past me toward Grandma’s house again. “You know you can be weird about these types of things. You *always* think something is happening that’s not.”

I huffed behind him, slightly embarrassed. “I am *not* a conspiracy theorist. I just use my mind in creative ways—at least that’s what Grandma says.”

“Yeah, uh-huh.”

We broke through the cover of the trees. By the time we got to the back door, I had convinced myself that maybe the shadow was a trick of light, an illusion created by the rain. *Yeah, it was just created by the rain. That’s it.*

I couldn't help, though, the flesh bumps that rose on my arms.

Grandma opened the door as soon as we got close, her gray hair tied with bobby pins and piled on top of her head, cotton house shoes flopping in the air, still wearing her nightgown. She had been waiting for me lately, every time I got off the bus. Sometimes, she would even make the trek all the way down the street to walk me home. Her dark-brown face, usually calm and inviting, was lined with concern. In the two years since I had lost my parents, she had seemed to grow much older, not moving as fast as she used to, always hovering over Zion and me.

She grabbed us both and hugged us tight. "I told you to come straight home! You know things are changing . . . I thought the worst had happened. I don't know what I would do if . . ."

"Grandma," I whined, extricating myself from her arms. "It's just a little rain."

The faraway look appeared in Grandma's eyes again as she stared at the backyard. "Yeah . . . just a little rain."

Zion fished in his pocket again as Grandma ushered us inside. He pushed something toward me.

"Skittle?"



CHAPTER TWO

After we'd dried off, Aliyah texted Zion that she'd be over in a few minutes. She was struggling with her seven-year-old younger brother as they emerged from her father's car. I was in the front yard watching her, ringing dirty water out of my Chucks.

"Give it back, Kendall!"

"But I just wanna play with it!" he was whining.

Her dad sighed as he rummaged in the back seat, removing Aliyah's things. "Kendall, we don't have time for this. Give it back to your sister." Aliyah snatched the Switch handheld console from her brother and wrapped the book bag her daddy handed her around her shoulders.

"Hi, Mr. Banks," I said, thrusting my hand forward.

He squeezed it hard. "Hey, Cameron. How's it going? Grandma okay?"

Aliyah groaned and pushed her braids over her shoulder. “Dad, I told you—”

“She’s doing fine, Mr. Banks,” I said, interrupting her. “Aliyah, you ready for the weekend?”

“I sure am,” she said, placing her Switch in her bag. “I’m so glad it’s summer.”

Mr. Banks shivered, glancing at the sky. It had stopped raining, but the weather had gotten considerably colder since Zion and I had arrived home. “Sure doesn’t feel like it.”

Kendall tugged at his father’s coat. “Can we go now? It’s cooo-olllddd.”

“Stop whining,” Aliyah said.

“Aliyah, enough,” Mr. Banks commanded. “Say goodbye to your brother.” Aliyah bent over and reluctantly hugged her brother, who pulled away as soon as he could. I waved goodbye to them all and led Aliyah inside.

“Bye, Dad! Love ya!” Aliyah called as they drove off.

Zion was lounging on the extra bed in my room reading one of my books, while Aliyah went to browse through Grandma’s Netflix account. Something hard and thick hit me upside the head as I placed my Chucks near the window to continue drying. I turned around. Zion was trying to stifle a laugh.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“You’re daydreaming again,” Zion said, shifting his glasses on his nose. “I didn’t do nothin’. You just got scared.”

“Don’t be mad because I have an imagination, something you clearly *don’t* have,” I said, gazing at the carpet as I spoke.

“And seriously, there was no need to throw a book at me to get my attention.” I saw my battered copy of the first book in the Percy Jackson series on the floor.

“I didn’t throw anything at you,” Zion said.

I looked back up at him. “You can’t just throw Percy Jackson! Do you know what those books mean to me?”

Zion gestured to what he was reading. “I didn’t throw anything at you, bro. I’m reading book two. Calm down.”

I narrowed my eyes at Zion, then turned toward the TV. “Did you find something to watch?” I asked Aliyah.

“Your grandma’s done a good job with the parental controls,” Aliyah responded. “All I see is kiddie stuff. What kinda summer are we supposed to have if we can’t watch anything above PG-13? *Stranger Things* again?”

Zion shivered. “I *hate* that show. It’s scary. We shouldn’t be watching it anyway. We’re not thirteen yet.”

“We can watch that again . . .,” I said, smirking at Zion as he closed his book and headed over to my bookshelf. “Make sure you turn up the volume.”

Crash. Aliyah and I both jumped as my entire bookshelf fell onto the floor, spilling all the contents on the ground. Zion still held the book in his hand, half-lifted as if he were waiting to put it back where he got it from.

“I promise I didn’t do that,” Zion said, eyes wide. “I wasn’t even close to it when it fell!”

“Come on, man, don’t lie,” I said. Fear crept up my spine. “A bookshelf can’t push itself to the floor.”

“I’m not lying!” he protested.

I sighed. Together, we lifted the heavy bookshelf and pushed it back against the wall, then returned the books to their places—Zion handed them to me, and I made sure they were arranged alphabetically by title, just how I liked them.

After we were done, Zion curled up on the spare twin bed. “That’s enough exercise for one day,” he said. He yawned, and his glasses slipped down his nose again. He acted as if he lived in my house. Which he actually kinda did.

Sometimes, I forgot how long we had been friends. We’d gravitated to each other in the first grade after coming in first and second place in Grady Elementary’s school-wide spelling bee. I won, of course, but then I’d found Zion crying after school in the bathroom. When I had asked him why he was so upset, he’d responded, “Because I’m supposed to be the smartest, not you.” I think that comment was supposed to make me mad, but it had only made me laugh. Which then made him laugh, too.

“How old are you again?” I had asked. From that moment on, we became inseparable. Now that we’d completed sixth grade, we’d started dreaming about working hard for college scholarships and getting out of Atlanta one day.

“I guess we have to settle for *Stranger Things*.” Aliyah sighed, throwing the remote down in disgust. I was glad when we added Aliyah to our two-person crew at the beginning of our sixth-grade year at Grady. She started out as the

new girl; she sat alone in class, ate lunch alone while fiddling with her Pokémon cards, and played by herself at recess. Then I introduced myself, and we played a battle with her cards—not before I made a joke about how only older people still played with them. She had tried to cheat by using two of her cards to attack mine, even though the game rules clearly stated she could only use one. She hadn’t known yet that Mama and I had played with Pokémon cards for years before she died.

We became fast friends after that. Zion was jealous at first—and in some ways, still was—but he had ended his sulking pretty quickly after she invited us over and he saw her gaming setup. Her father was a video game developer, and she always got the latest games first.

As soon as the remote hit the floor, the lights in my bedroom flickered, and we heard a flash of thunder.

“It’s raining again—” I started to say, but this time, the power went out, leaving us in complete darkness. Zion screamed and pulled the covers over his head. Aliyah rolled her eyes; I could see the whites of them in the darkness.

“Here he goes again,” Aliyah said.

I crept over to my bedroom door and peeked outside. The hallway was dark, too. “Looks like the power is out in the entire house.”

“Do you have a circuit breaker? We can turn the electricity back on easily,” Aliyah said.

I stiffened. “Y-y-yeah, we have one.” I swallowed hard. “I

mean, I *think* we do.” I paused for a second. “What’s a circuit breaker again?”

Aliyah sighed. “A circuit breaker holds all the electric circuits in your home, Cam. It’s what you use when the lights go out! I bet it’s in the attic. That’s where it is in my house.”

I hesitated. “Yeah . . . the attic’s locked. We can’t go up there.”

Aliyah started to walk toward the bedroom door. “Don’t be silly. Come on. Let’s go upstairs.”

I grabbed her arm before she could take another step. “There’s another problem,” I said as Zion let out another small, frightened squeak. “I don’t know how to use a circuit breaker.”

Aliyah twirled her braids. “How old are you again? It’s no big deal. Daddy used to be an electrician before he started designing games, so I know how to use them. You just read the names written on each switch and power the room you want. Or it could be the breaker on the whole house, which would be a bigger problem. But come on—let’s go check.”

Nervousness crept in. “The attic is locked. I don’t want to get in trouble if Grandma catches us up there.”

Zion shifted the covers so that the only thing showing was his glasses. “Trust me, Cam has a good reason for not wanting to go upstairs,” he said, his words muffled.

“Shut up, Zion,” I warned.

“What are y’all talking about?” Aliyah said.

“Nothing, Aliyah,” I said.

“He’s lying,” Zion said in a singsong voice. “There’s an old book up there. His parents read it to him when he was a kid. They said it came from their ancestors. It’s super creepy and awesome.” He threw off the covers and puffed out his chest. “We used to read it all the time.”

“It’s locked, and we don’t have a key,” I repeated, urging her to change her mind. “There’s no way the power has *not* gone out for two years, so the circuit breaker can’t be up there.”

“You’re trying to change the subject,” Aliyah said. Her eyes sparkled with interest. “I wanna see this book!”

“No. It’s not—” I said.

“It’s in the attic,” Zion finished. “Grandma has forbidden us from going up there.”

“Zion—it’s locked.”

Aliyah made her way to my bedroom door again, turning the knob and peering out into the hallway. “It’s settled. We’re going upstairs. I might be able to pick the lock.”

“Please, Aliyah. No . . .,” I said. I couldn’t help, though, the curiosity that gripped me now.

She walked over, concern in her eyes. “I understand, Cam. I do. You’ve been through so much. Even though your mother’s things belong to you now, if you don’t wanna go, we won’t go.”

She was correct. I had a right to see and read the book my mama had left me. The *Book* was *mine* now that she was gone, but Grandma had been trying to keep it from me. Still,

there was no way we could get in the attic without a key, and Grandma always had it with her. And I was *not* going to let Aliyah pick the lock.

“You’re right. But first we need—” I stopped talking as soon as I went to the bedroom door, Aliyah following behind. Shining in blue light on the hallway floor was the key to the attic, its head encased in pink tape.

“Hmm, that doesn’t make any sense,” I said, picking it up from the floor. The blue light disappeared as I grasped it, making me think it was just a trick of the light—or lack of light, actually. “It’s the attic key.”

That didn’t stop the fear, though. *How did it get here? Did I just think it into existence?*

By this time, Zion had joined us, putting my thoughts to words. “Um, Cam, how did the key get there?”

“No clue,” I whispered. “Maybe Grandma dropped it on her way to her room?”

Aliyah snatched it from me. “We’ll use the flashlight on my phone to see. Let’s go.”

As we crept up the stairs to the attic, I couldn’t shake the feeling that shivered up my skin. *Why would the key be in the hallway?*

The last time I was able to look at the *Book* was two years ago. Grandma and I had snuggled up on one of the worn sofas in the attic a few days after my parents left, right after she had told me they had died in a car crash and wouldn’t be coming back. It was a night like this night, stormy and gray. Grandma

read about Queen Ramala, the main character in the *Book*, and was showing me her picture when suddenly it glowed golden, and I could have sworn the pictures began to move. The queen's hair, which had been dark brown, started to turn gray before our very eyes . . .

"That's enough," Grandma had said, her voice choked in her throat as she slammed the *Book* shut. "We're done." She dragged me out of the attic, not even giving me a chance to protest, and locked the door behind us. She said, tears swimming in her eyes, "Don't *ever* come back up to this attic, you hear me?" My own tears clogged in my throat; it was like I had lost my parents for the second time.

But now, we tiptoed up the stairs to the third floor, defying her orders. When we got to the attic door, I put the key in and opened it.