CAMERON BATTLE AND THE ESCAPE TRIALS

Also by Jamar J. Perry

Cameron Battle and the Hidden Kingdoms

CAMERON BATTLE AND THE ESCAPE TRIALS

JAMAR J. PERRY

BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS
NEW YORK LONDON OXFORD NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS,
and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in the United States of America in February 2023
by Bloomsbury Children's Books
www.bloomsbury.com

Copyright © 2023 by Jamar J. Perry
Map by Joe LeMonnier

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical,
including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system,
without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

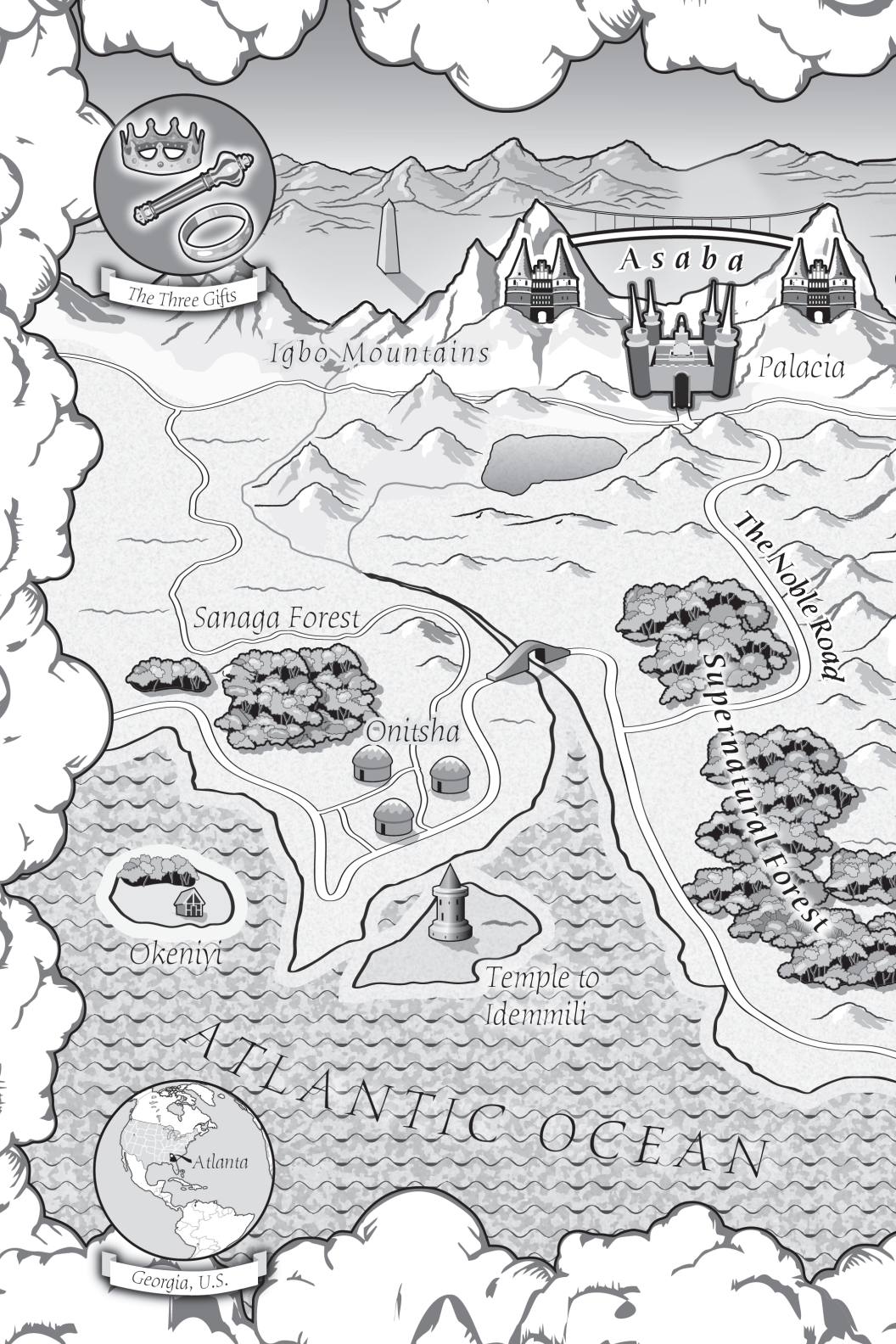
Bloomsbury books may be purchased for business or promotional use.
For information on bulk purchases please contact Macmillan Corporate and
Premium Sales Department at specialmarkets@macmillan.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
available upon request
ISBN 978-1-5476-0725-9 (hardcover) • ISBN 978-1-5476-0869-0 (e-book)

Book design by Jeanette Levy
Typeset by Westchester Publishing Services
Printed and bound in the U.S.A.
2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

To find out more about our authors and books visit
www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters.

T/K


The Three Gifts
Igbo Mountains
Asaba
Palacia
The Noble Road
Sanaga Forest
Onitsha
Supernatural Forest
Okeniyi
Temple to Idemmili
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Atlanta
Georgia, U.S.


N
W
E
S
Efik
Igbo Mountains
Ibibio
Cave of Shadows
Animal Court
Gate
Desert
The Noble Road
Owerri
Crystal City
Igboland
Nigeria, Africa

CAMERON BATTLE AND THE ESCAPE TRIALS

CHAPTER ONE

"Watch out!" I said, reaching out and grabbing Zion's backpack straps as he tumbled off the bus steps.

"Whoa," he said as I pulled him back. "That was close."

I pointed at the book in his hand. "Reading again instead of watching where you're going?"

He smirked at me, curls bouncing over his eyes, as he jumped down onto the concrete and started to walk to the bright yellow entrance of Sutton Middle School, our new school s that we had finished elementary. "Aww, so you care about me?"

"Not really," I said, running to keep in step with him as we went through the entrance. I snatched the book from him—the second in the Percy Jackson series—and stuffed it in my backpack. "I care more about *my* books, you know, the ones you keep stealing from me."

A crowd converged inside the large school building, which

was built with a mixture of red-and-gray brick on one side, with its center carved out of glass. Zion dug in his pocket, ignoring my accusation.

"You've had it all summer," I said, whispering this time. "You know . . . ever since . . ."

"Ahh," Zion said, fishing out a slip of paper. "There it is! My locker number and combination." He grabbed my hand and pushed through the crowd of scared-looking new middle schoolers, pulling me to the second-floor stairs as a large man stepped in the hallway and yelled, "Seventh graders! Let's get moving. First period starts soon!"

Zion had been waiting for middle school ever since we had come back from Chidani, talking about it nonstop. I hadn't particularly cared, though, because my mind was on saving my mama and figuring out what happened to Daddy.

I let Zion pull me upstairs, across the stainless marble, our new sneakers squeaking over the floor. I fished my slip from my pocket—"Don't forget this, Cam," Grandma had said on the way out of the house this morning—while Zion mumbled his locker number and combination to himself, stepping up to number 207. I folded my arms, leaning against mine, number 209, right next to his.

"We need to talk about it, Zion," I whispered again. "There's so much that happened—"

Zion sighed, opened his locker, and stuffed his things in, cutting me off. "Cam, can I just have one regular day?" he asked, taking out another sheet, his class schedule. He grabbed

his leg, squeezing it as he gazed at the paper. "Can I just get one day where I get to be a kid? It's the first day of school, and you're acting like the world is going to end."

"But it *will* end if Amina gets what she wants," I hissed.

A quick look of concern appeared on Zion's face before it disappeared. "Listen, we have English with Ms. Maton first period. We should get there." He patted my shoulder. "If you want to talk about it, we can. But can it wait until after school?"

I sighed again, pulling the straps of my backpack tighter around my shoulders. "I guess so."

He tossed me one last glance before making his way through the crowds of bewildered-looking students to class. I stood there for a while, deep in thought. I guess I understood a bit; we had been through death and back in a matter of months, and Zion wanted to forget about it for a while. But, for me, I just didn't see a point. Nothing made sense any longer, including school.

There was a mixture of excitement and nervousness in the air as my elementary class experienced middle school for the first time. But I couldn't feel anything, except for an itch to return to Chidani to finish what we had started.

Before long, the hall had cleared and I was left with a few stragglers as the late bell rung. The large man from earlier stepped forward, a crease burrowing itself into his forehead, his lips pursed.

"Really?" he said, shaking his bald head, taking off a sheet

of paper from his clipboard and beginning to write with a black pen. "Late on the first day of school? Let's get to class, son." He handed me the paper, a write-up. I scoffed as I opened my locker and stuffed my backpack inside after I removed my class notebooks and pens.

Written in red letters on the paper were the words Late to Class. Detention on Friday, 3:30 p.m.

"Already?" I said, snapping the locker shut with more vigor than I meant. By the time I got to Ms. Maton's class, every student was seated. Zion sat in the front, as we always did, but the seat next to him was occupied. He gestured with his hands as if to say, "I tried, bro."

"Mr. Battle, I presume," Ms. Maton said from the board, her eyes kind as she regarded me. "You're the only one who hasn't shown up yet."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, gripping my notebooks hard against my chest. Every eye in the class was on me.

She pointed to a seat in the back. "There's only one open seat left." She handed me a worksheet, then gestured to a cart of literature textbooks by the door. "Go ahead and take one, write your name on the first page, and then turn to page thirty, and we can get started. I'll record your textbook number later."

I did as I was told, and walked past Zion, grumbling "traitor" under my breath so that only he could hear it. He giggled behind his hands as I sat down.

I barely paid attention as Ms. Maton passed out the syllabus,

going over the rules of her classroom. But I did turn to page thirty in the textbook like she asked, and read along with the class as we went through an excerpt from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and filled out the worksheet on theme.

"Hey, you?" someone whispered to my right. I scrunched my forehead, turning my head as the class continued to read aloud.

"*You?*" I mouthed. "I do have a name," I whispered back.

The boy who said it chuckled a bit. He tapped his worksheet with his index finger, where "Vince" was scrawled at the top. "What's your name?"

I pursed my lips, my attention returning to my worksheet as Ms. Maton strolled past our desks and went back to the front of the class, holding her teacher's textbook. I heard a *tsk* coming from Vince's mouth, but I didn't turn to him again. Just then, a sharp pain ratcheted across my chest, and I struggled to keep the groan in. The pain vanished, though, in another second.

"Hey, yo, I need your help," Vince whispered again. This time, I looked at him from the corner of my eyes. He was a Black boy, just a little bit taller than me. He wore all-red Nike Foamposites, his dark jeans barely reaching the top of his shoes. An emblem of a basketball and the school sigil of an eagle was stitched into his black shirt, marking him as a basketball player.

"Hey, yo," he said once more.

"What?" I said, annoyed at this point.

"Do you have another pencil?"

I pointed at his worksheet. "How did you write your name?"

He held up a pencil with a broken tip. "The one I was using obviously stopped working."

I gestured at the entire classroom. "It's literally the first day of school, bro. How you forget to bring extras to class?"

"And how you forget to get to class on time?" he grumbled.

"Cameron, Vince, is there a problem back there?" Ms. Maton said from the board, annoyance flitting past her face, too. "We should be reading and filling out the worksheet."

"No, ma'am," Vince said, a smile brightening his face, his teeth the color of pearls. "Sorry about that. Won't happen again."

Her face softened at his response while I pursed my lips even harder.

"Brownnoser," I mouthed.

Zion shifted his head to me, but then he turned back around while I went back to reading.

"Yo, I said I need a pencil," Vince whispered. "I know you got one, nerd."

I slammed my pen down on my desk, looking at Vince once again. Red appeared in his eyes, but when I blinked, it had disappeared. I noticed how the hair on top of his head stood tall, while the back of his head was shaved bald. Designs

were drawn into its sides. I shuffled through my pockets and handed him a pen. "Here."

"Thanks," he said, writing once, then putting it in his ear, and leaning back in his seat so far that the top rail of it was poised against the wall.

Really? You're gonna terrorize me about something to write with and then hardly even use it? Ms. Maton's eyes searched the back of the classroom where she saw Vince obviously not paying attention, with his seat leaning against the wall, and said nothing. I seethed, but kept my focus on the work at hand; it wasn't that I was angry at Vince. He was a basketball player, and he could probably get away with anything he wanted. I was annoyed that instead of figuring out a plan for Chidani, I was stuck dealing with pests like the one sitting right next to me.

As soon as the bell rung, I passed my work down the aisle and was the first to stand up, but not before a foot stuck out and crashed into my leg. I flipped over and hit the floor, my cheek banging against the linoleum.

"Ugh," I groaned as all the kids around me laughed.

"Cameron, are you okay?" Ms. Maton said.

Something clattered against the floor next to my mouth. My pen. I grabbed it and stood, sending dark glares Vince's way. He only smiled innocently and whispered quietly, only loud enough for me to hear.

"Next time, when I ask for something to write with, give

it to me." His eyes turned to my feet. "And what's up with the Converses? Nerd 2.0."

I pushed past the group of students crowding around me, my face hot, and went out of the classroom, Zion following close behind.