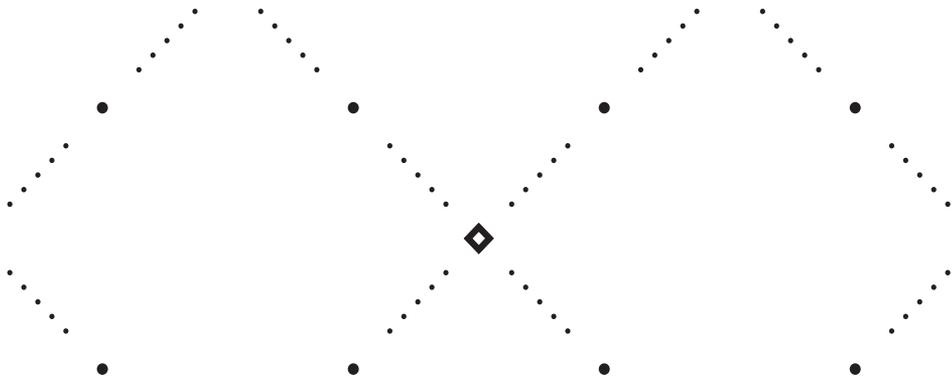


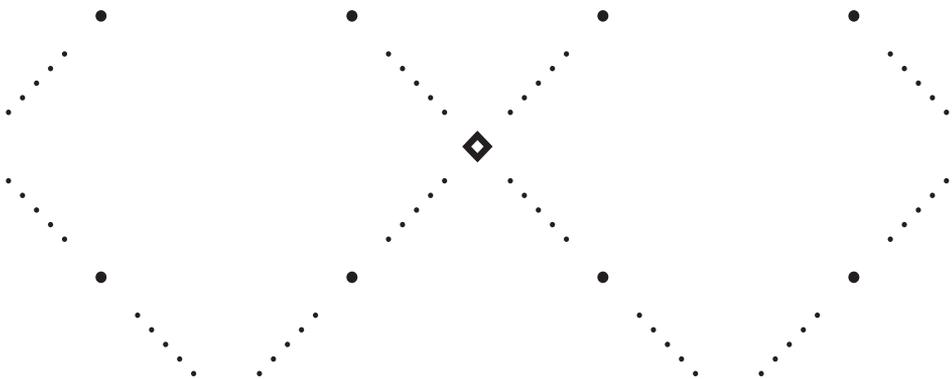
JORDAN H. BARTLETT

Q CONTEST OF  
QUEENS

When you're on the edge,  
your next step is to fly or fall.



# Q CONTEST OF QUEENS



JORDAN H. BARTLETT

Q CONTEST OF  
QUEENS

She who wears the crown  
must earn it.



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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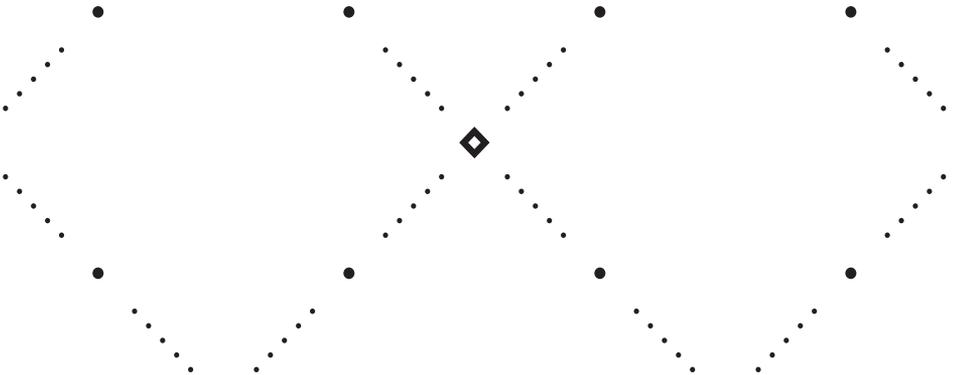
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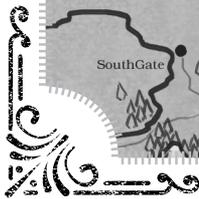
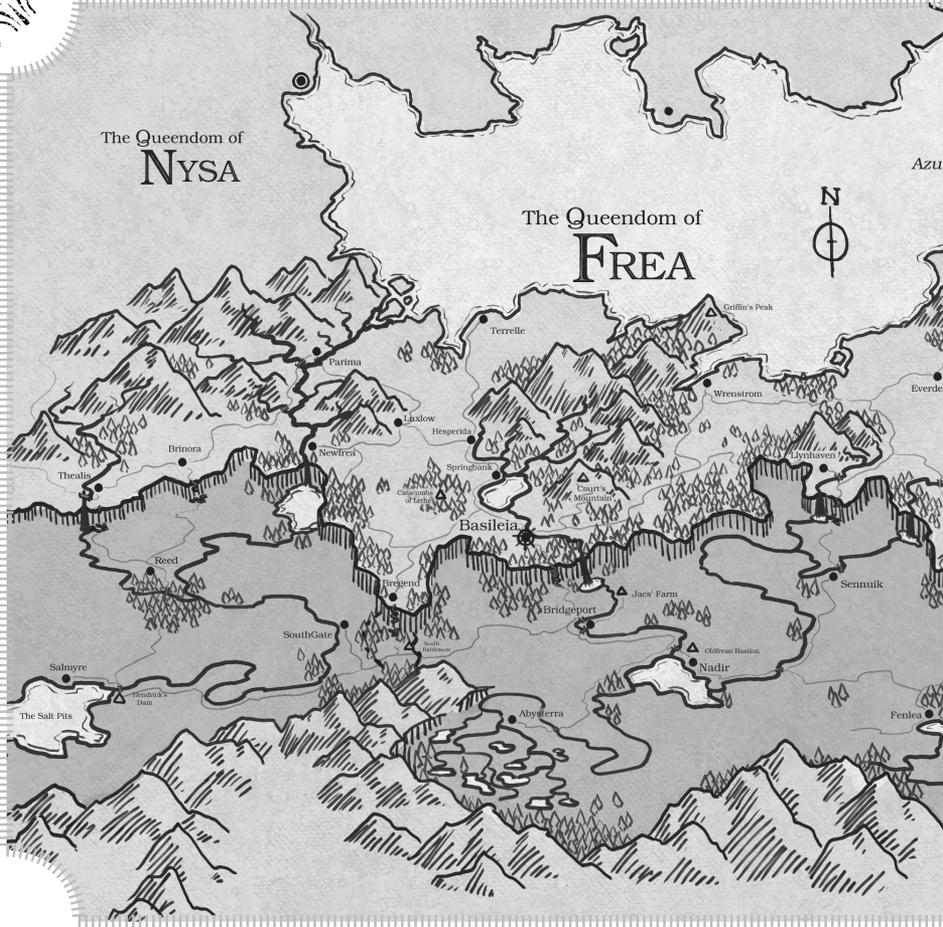
*In memory of Poppa Roy,  
for painting castles in the sky  
and showing me the way to get there.  
Your stories are sorely missed.*



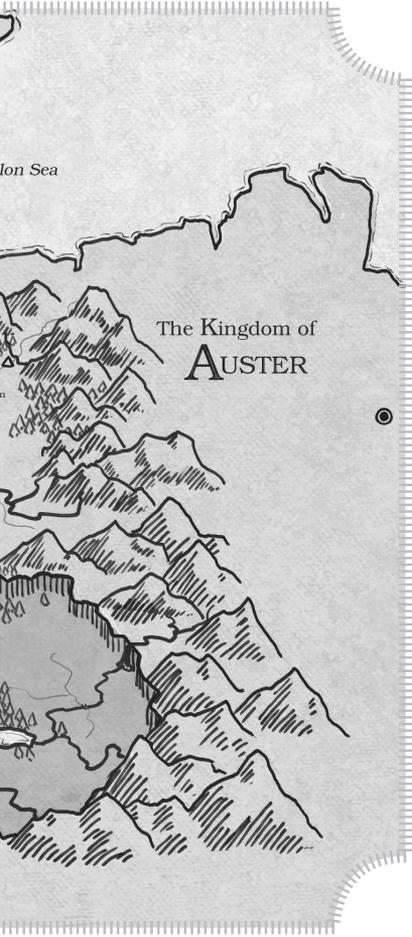


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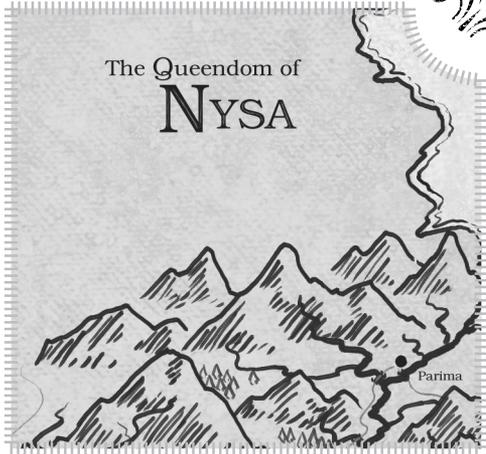
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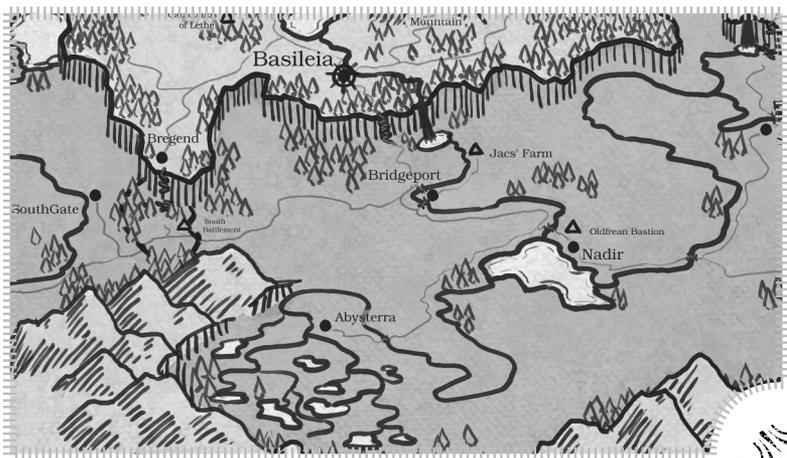
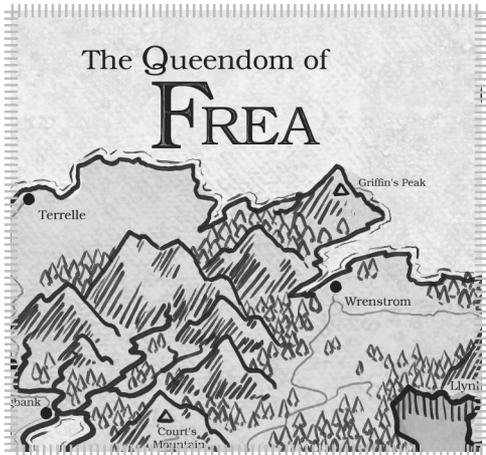
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The Queendom of  
NYSA



The Queendom of  
FREA





# 1

## THE FIRST VOYAGE

“There’s too many of them!” Iliana roared, her long black hair streaming behind her like a war banner. Connor’s keen eyes studied the battlefield and he cursed, sweeping his hair from his face, the wind whipping the acrid stench of battle around him. Their eyes locked for a moment. Adrenaline still coursing through her veins, she grasped his waist and drew him in for a deep, passionate kiss. When she let him go, he took a moment to catch his breath. Eyes wild, smile flashing, she drew her sword. “But with you here, we just might have a chance.” He stood up straighter. Her words burned in his mind, and the ghost of her lips lingered on his. He drew his sword and brandished it high.

“Let’s finish this,” he bellowed. Iliana’s battle cry rang in his ears and they leaped forward as one. A light flashed across his field of vision, blinding him. He staggered back, his sword dropping to his side. Iliana looked at him, confused. The light flashed again, and he felt the world around him begin to fade.

Rolling over, he groaned. The weight of leather armor dissolved to the weight of featherdown.

The first fingers of sunlight crept their way through the crack in the heavy velvet curtains. Gentle rays inched along the cold stone floor, up a mahogany bedpost, and dusted the sleep from the Prince’s eyes. His brow wrinkled as he fought to stay with Iliana a little longer behind his closed lids. Reluctantly, Connor blinked his blue eyes open. Once. Twice. Then he sat upright.

*It’s Sunday, he thought. Finally. Every good adventure starts on a Sunday.*

Stretching, he threw back the covers and cast his gaze around the room. Already, his mind whirled with preparations. He would need light clothes—nothing to weigh him down—and his compass. A list of items ran through his head, and he started moving about the room to retrieve them all. Although he tried his best to pack quietly, his excitement inspired slamming drawers and heavy footfalls.

He rummaged through pairs of leather boots. Buckles clinked together, and fabric murmured softly as he sifted through blacks, browns, and tans. He picked up a tall pair, frowned, then exchanged them for shorter ones, the leather well worn. He couldn’t risk blisters today, and the tall ones rubbed his ankles.

Next, he dragged his knapsack from under his desk. The canvas was worn on a corner, a leather strap needed mending, and it had the faint aroma of wet dog; this was not something a prince would

own. He had traded one of the serving boys for it, as all of his bags were much too fancy for expeditions.

He tightened one of the straps and his mind floated to the leather hilt of the sword in his dream. His sword. The sword of a knight. He paused and sighed as the thought struck him. To be a knight. Now that was the dream, but that was ridiculous. His mother had explained to him once that only women could become guards, and of them, only certain guards could become knights. The Knights of the Queendom carried the responsibility of taking another's life. Only those who could create life could be trusted with the burden of extinguishing it. Besides, at fourteen he wanted the glory, not the burden.

Indulging for a moment in the fantasy, he saw himself in the light armor of a knight, sword aloft, cape unfurling behind him, the wind blowing through his brown hair, commanding a battalion of strong and beautiful guards, all secretly in love with him, of course. He, the first male knight. Much more exciting than being one of a long line of princes. All princes got to do was learn how to be good advisors. Shaking the fantasy from his head, he turned back to his task.

He sighed. He couldn't be a knight, but he could be an explorer. He could be a conqueror of realms.

When he was younger, he used to pretend he was a bold adventurer: Connor the Conqueror. A man who bravely explored the herb gardens and discovered new tracks through the manicured hedge mazes. He chuckled at the memory. Since then, he had never felt quite comfortable as Cornelius; Connor was a better fit. Less stuffy, and most important, it was his. Something private. A rare possession for a prince.

His eyes scanned the bookshelf for his telescope. Not spying it there, he opened the large, studded trunk at the end of his bed. The

hinges on the lid groaned weakly. He sifted through its contents, his fingertips brushing across an assortment of forgotten items at the bottom, until he located the desired object. A small brass spyglass. He tucked it in his belt in the same fashion as Amelia the Daring on the cover of *To The World's End*. He was almost ready.

Winning at the thought of the commotion he had most definitely caused, Connor stepped back lightly to where his project of many evenings lay finished and gleaming on his desk by the window. In the new daylight, the hull shone a warm, rich red. It was a wooden boat and his ticket to adventure. The hull was about half the length of his forearm and was topped with a canvas sail. He picked it up carefully from where it had been propped up to dry and surveyed his handiwork. Not a splinter in sight (they had tended to prefer ending up in his thumbs).

He gently opened a small hidden compartment in the center of the ship's deck to reveal a rectangular recess. Then, placing the boat back on the desk, he opened the top drawer, withdrew the letter he had written the night before while the paint was drying, and rolled it up into a tight tube.

He slid his signet ring off his pinkie finger and held it up to the morning sunlight. Tilting it between his fingers, he admired as the light danced off the engraved Griffin. It pranced with wings unfurled and talons flaring as if to grasp the clouds it rose above. A design of his own request. It marked his first attempt at his own coat of arms.

Every fourteen-year-old should have their own coat of arms, even boys. He had debated what creature to choose for days. His mother had the lion on hers, his father had the eagle, but he had wanted something entirely his own. He had seen their likeness in paintings and tapestries throughout the palace, and twice in person

when the Griffins had overseen an important audience in the throne room. They were magnificent. He had never been more in awe of another living creature in his life. When he one day became the Queen's advisor, he wanted to inspire that same awe. So, the Griffin he chose.

Master Aestos, the court goldsmith, had been delighted when Connor described the desired ring. Master Aestos, who insisted that Connor call him Heph (even though any person who was a master of their craft must be referred to as Master), would be far less delighted to find out where his intricate work was headed. Connor shook his head and pushed that thought out of his mind.

Placing the scroll inside the ring, he fished a small glass vial out of the top drawer and slotted the bundle into the vial. He stoppered it with a cork and took some time to seal the top with melted wax. That done, he delicately placed the sealed vial into the hull, slid the lid shut, and grinned. Now, he was ready.

Connor glanced out the window. The sun shone brightly on the horizon and sent tiny rainbows through the crystalline pattern around the edges of his large bay windows. It was shaping up to be a fine day. He wrapped the boat in a kerchief and placed it carefully in his knapsack. Swinging the pack onto his back, he shrugged his shoulders, letting it settle. With one last sweeping glance around his room, he crossed to the door.

Listening for any noise out on the landing, hand hovering over the pommel of a sword that was not there, Connor eased the door open a crack, an inch, then all the way. He looked up and down the empty carpeted hallway. Surely, not all adventures began so casually. He was almost disappointed not to be intercepted.

It wasn't until he descended the servants' stairwell that he encountered his first challenge. The decadent smells from the

kitchen wafted up the stairwell and caressed his nose, making his mouth water. He had forgotten to pack food, and, as his days as Connor the Conqueror had taught him, he would need to maintain his strength for the long journey ahead.

Quietly, he snuck into the kitchen and ducked behind a large barrel of potatoes. The kitchen was alive with smells and sounds. Master Marmalade—no, Master Marmaduke, the head cook, was firing off instructions to her minions and sending them scuttling to and fro. Flour flew, pans clanged, and spoons were held out on demand for a taste.

The Prince could see the morning's breakfast coming together like a well-choreographed dance. He watched them for a minute before his stomach growled in protest and forced him into action. Crouching and hiding his face, he sidled casually along a sturdy counter until he reached the spot where an assortment of muffins and scones were laid out on cooling racks.

Using sleight of hand he and his friend Hector had practiced together, he swiped three muffins into the knapsack he had nonchalantly placed open on the floor. Careful not to draw attention to himself, he forced himself to slow his actions. He took a moment to lick his fingers clean of the crumbs and berry juice from where he had squashed a raspberry.

With that same practiced calm, he picked up his knapsack and sidled toward the door.

He was almost free when Master Marmaduke's loud, booming voice silenced the clatter of the kitchen.

"Wait!" Her voice cut cleaner than the knife she was using to slice a still-steaming loaf of bread.

The Prince froze and tried to look innocent despite his raspberry-stained fingers.

She surveyed him with her hands on her hips, her lips thin, and her eyes narrow. The flour clinging to her hair made her look older than her true years, and the premature gray streaked through her naturally brown locks spoke of a life not leisurely spent. Master Marmaduke had worked for the royal family for the past eight years, but the stress and responsibility of running the royal kitchens had aged her double that. Despite this, her hazel eyes still held a twinkle that sparkled brightest when regarding the Prince, as they did now.

“Prince Cornelius, that is not a proper lunch for a growing boy,” she said and walked toward him, picking up a linen bundle filled to bursting with what she considered a “proper lunch” from one of the few unused counters as she spoke. “It always pays to be prepared.” She winked as she placed the lumpy package of treats in his hands.

The Prince smiled. “Thanks, Master Marmalade,” he said, using the nickname he had given her when he was a child.

The cook chuckled fondly. “So where are you headed so early? Will I need to send the search parties today?”

“That was one time, Master Marmalade, and I would have been fine if given another hour,” the Prince said indignantly. Shrugging off his knapsack, he gently placed the packed lunch inside. Master Marmaduke cleared her throat meaningfully and held out her hand. Connor sighed and pulled two stolen muffins from his sack and placed them in her hand. She accepted them and clicked her fingers, her hand still outstretched. Grinning, Connor handed over the last muffin, squashed raspberry and all, and bowed, conceding, before turning toward the door.

Master Marmaduke laughed again. “All right, you just be kind to this heart of mine.” With that, she picked up her knife and turned back to her chopping board. Connor grinned and let the door close

behind him. He settled his now much heavier knapsack on his back. Shoulders back, he strode toward the gardens. He had a ship to sail.

Once Connor was out on the castle lawns, he took out his compass. He already knew where he was going, but he had been practicing using it with Master Boreas and thought he was getting the hang of how it worked. The needle spun and bobbed. Connor twisted it this way and that and pointed it first toward the sun, then toward the ground. Trying to remember his lessons, he frowned at the tiny, twitchy piece of metal. He studied it fruitlessly for a few more minutes before nodding decisively to himself and setting off in a westerly manner, or . . . maybe it was a northern stroll he was embarking upon . . . No, considering the angle of the sun, it was definitely an eastern expedition, he decided.

He headed in the direction of the South Tower and passed the Southern Rose Garden. Their many-hued heads nodded lazily in the slight morning breeze. The sound of bees flitting between flower beds rose and fell on the air.

Grass clung to the soles of Connor's boots as he walked across the expansive palace lawn. *A lesser man could get lost in grounds like these*, he thought. *But I am a fearless conqueror.* Remembering how Iliana had looked at him in his dream, he emboldened his stride and began to swing his arms slightly. It was another twenty minutes before he reached the forest and found himself on the banks of the river that his compass had pointed him toward.

The water gurgled and giggled in and around the time-worn pebbles and stones that lined the riverbed. The trees were less manicured here and hung low and irregularly along the banks, sometimes dipping their leaves in the fresh water, sometimes grouping together so tightly as to bar others from enjoying that particular stretch of riverbank.

Heading downstream, he felt the forest deepening, the river widening. Any sounds from the castle were now far behind him and his ears filled instead with the sound of rushing water. Every now and then he heard the groan of two trees colliding in the breeze. The jarring sound of trunk on trunk made the hair stand up on the back of his neck. He was deeply aware that he was an intruder in these parts. His games with the Lords' and Genteels' sons never took him this far. The Lords always worried too much about their sons venturing too far from the castle. Connor supposed that was just what mothers did, and their husbands or wives—the Genteels—tended to agree with whatever their Lord said.

A twig snapped, and he spun around.

"Who's there?" he asked, his voice thin and feeble to his ears. The moss and lichen absorbed any edge his tone may have held. A gentle breeze played with his hair in reply, and he smelled the damp rot of the forest floor. Heart flutter, he swallowed and pressed on.

If Amelia the Daring had turned back every time a branch snapped, she wouldn't have left her grounds, he thought fiercely. The thought of Amelia staring defiantly into the void spurred him on. He may not be a brave woman, but he was not a boy anymore, he was almost a man, and Prince at that. Shoulders back and head high, he lengthened his stride and quickened his pace. *It's just a bunch of trees and some water*, he told himself. Briefly his mind flitted to Master Marmaduke, and he tried to deny the wave of relief that came with knowing someone would come to look for him.

Twig torn and grass stained, he followed the river for the better part of the morning. Suddenly, the trees thinned, the sun shone down on him, the earth disappeared a few feet in front of him, and he was there. He had made it.

The Edge of the World.

The Cliff.

The separation between the Upper and Lower Realms.

He had seen portraits and tapestries decorated with images of the Cliff. He had skirted the edge with his mother many times on horseback. He had even climbed halfway up Court's Mountain with his friend Hector to see the drop more clearly. But never had he been this close. The dense forest bordering almost the entire edge was enough of a deterrent for most Upperite citizens.

If not the forest, then the possibility of the dizzying fall itself deterred the rest. Connor had never been explicitly forbidden to venture this close; it was just assumed he would not entertain the risk.

His palms tingling, Connor paused several yards from the edge. The river tumbled over the Cliff in a wild and endless stream. The sound of the waterfall was swallowed hundreds of yards below. Steeling himself, Connor placed his pack at the base of the nearest tree. He dropped down on his hands and knees to crawl as close as he dared toward the abyss. Creeping forward and dropping to his stomach, he eased himself toward the large oak tree whose roots seemed to hold this section of the Cliff together. He peered over the lip, holding fast to the tree's rough bark. Some of the roots dangled free of the earth like veins outside of a body.

Whoa.

Connor's eyes flicked down—down, down, and down—the steep Cliff face. Too vast to comprehend, it seemed to curve at the periphery of his vision. He fought a wave of vertigo, closed his eyes for a moment, and opened them to inspect the world below. He saw the waterfall pool into a lake, then flow into a river that meandered its way to a small town. He shifted his gaze toward the line of mountains on the horizon and saw fields, villages, and

small patches of forest plotted and pieced and stretched out like a patchwork quilt. A true pied beauty.

Whoa.

He often forgot the world was so big.

Living in the palace, it was easy to forget that the vastness of the Upper Realm was tiny compared to the rolling fields and hills of the Lower Realm. He followed the various roads that cut their way around and across the rivers and marshland with his eyes and marveled at the imposing border of mountains that cut the Lower Realm off from all that lay beyond. He could not believe his mother ruled such a large Queendom. There were still many parts of the Upper Realm he had not been to, and he had only been to the Lower Realm once as a baby.

All he knew about the Lower Realm he had heard from attending his mother's meetings with the Council of Four. Four stern women who advised his mother and had advised her mother before her. The Council never had nice things to say about Lowrians. Words like "simple," "dirty," and "greedy" were used often.

He stayed that way, frozen on the edge, for a long time, reminding himself to breathe, frequently closing his eyes, and focusing on the feel of grass and dirt under his palms when the height became too much.

But Connor had come here for a reason. Pushing down another wave of vertigo, he retreated a few yards from the edge and eventually made his way back to his knapsack. Once there, he felt the tightness in his chest release.

He pulled out the small boat and unwrapped it from the kerchief. Bending down, he plucked a few blades of grass, straightened up, and let them fall in the breeze. The wind was perfect for this vessel's maiden voyage.

He checked the ship over again, testing the sails, resealing the hatch, and inspecting the hull for any abnormalities. Once he had deemed the boat was seaworthy, and taking a moment to wonder if this was where the term *shipshape* had come from, he walked over to the water's edge.

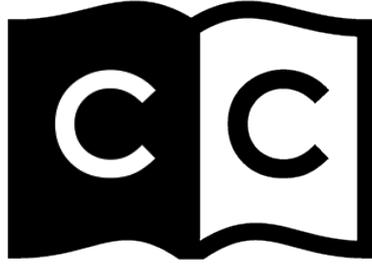
*I should say a few words*, he thought.

Feeling silly for a moment but realizing there was no one around to care, he cleared his throat, stood solemnly on the banks of the river, and began.

“May your flags fly and your riggings hold true. May the wind always be at your back, and may the stars guide your journey. You are the first expedition to seek the land below and . . . er. . . good luck.” He paused, then emended: “Goddess be with you all, brave women and men.” He nodded, saluted the imaginary crew, then gently placed the small wooden boat in the water and nudged it toward the middle of the river.

For a moment, Connor thought the boat had sunk. He lost sight of the vessel as the water climbed over itself to get to the edge first, eager to leap into the void. Then he saw a flash of red in an eddy, and suddenly, the edge rushed up to meet the little boat. It hung for just a moment, suspended above the chasm, then toppled out of sight.

Connor grinned broadly. Carefully, he crawled over to the Cliff's edge again, trying to catch another glimpse of the boat as it fell. He watched the waterfall until long after any chance of spotting the boat had passed, and he rolled onto his back, his heart light and his mind following the ship as it embarked on its great adventure. He may be trapped in his palace, but somewhere far below, his boat ventured into the unknown.



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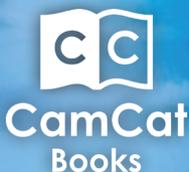
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# IN A QUEENDOM DIVIDED, CAN ONE GIRL UNITE THE REALMS?

Jacs, an inventor's apprentice from the Lower Realm, has only ever dreamed of what the land among the clouds holds. That is until she finds a letter from Connor, an Upperite boy hoping to learn more about the land below. Little does Jacs know, Connor is actually Prince Cornelius of the Queendom of Frea. With wooden boats and hot air balloons, the two begin a secret correspondence. But their friendship is divided by a heavily-guarded bridge and an inescapable prejudice.

The strength of their bond was thought to transcend distance and time, but when the royal family visits the Lower Realm, the Queendom's feud is reignited.

To save her people, Jacs must infiltrate the Upper Realm and earn her place to compete in the Contest of Queens. In a story about friendship, love, bravery, and defying gravity, Jacs will strive to prove that a Queendom is strongest when united.



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