



Once a Queen

A NOVEL



SNEAK PEEK
SAMPLE ONLY

SARAH ARTHUR

Praise for
Once a Queen

“*Once a Queen* is reminiscent of beautiful books of magic written in the past, but it’s also a fresh, delightful new tale for our wonder-hungry era. With a rich sense of place, vivid characters, a page-turning plot, and a redemptive theme about the healing of generational wounds, Sarah Arthur has created a story that lingers in the memory and shapes the soul long after reading the last page.”

—MITALI PERKINS, National Book Award nominee and
author of *You Bring the Distant Near*, *Rickshaw Girl*,
and *Holy Night and Little Star*

“Readers of Lewis and L’Engle, prepare to be enchanted. This is a captivating novel that will make you want to revisit the fantasy stories of your childhood.”

—SARAH MACKENZIE, author of *The Read-Aloud Family*

“I discovered some of my favorite books when I was young and my family lived in a farmhouse—I would read long into the night under my blankets, flashlight in hand. Well, as soon as I started reading Sarah Arthur’s book *Once a Queen*, I felt like that little kid again and I simply didn’t want to stop reading. The detailed setting, the memorable characters, the mysterious storyline—everything comes together to create a generational book.”

—SHAWN SMUCKER, author of *The Day the Angels Fell*

“*Once a Queen* is written in sumptuous language that makes this poet’s heart sing. The magic here is palpable as Arthur deftly ferries readers from one world to another and back again with a wave of her pen. Best of all is the tenacity of hope woven throughout this tantalizing coming-of-age tale of a young girl bravely exploring her family’s painful secret past in search of healing for them all in the present. This may be a fantasy, but in many ways it is all too real.”

—NIKKI GRIMES, *New York Times* bestselling author
of *Garvey’s Choice* and *Garvey in the Dark*

“*Once A Queen* is Sarah Arthur’s love letter to great children’s literature. Throughout this book, beginning with the title, one sees her great love for classic writers such as C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and E. Nesbit. However, this book is no simplistic homage. Within these pages, Sarah Arthur tells her own unique tale, full of intrigue and wonder, which is sure to enchant the imagination of a new generation of young adults.”

—DAVID BATES, co-host of the
C. S. Lewis-themed podcast *Pints with Jack*



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WATERBROOK



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Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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For Tom, Micah, and Sam:

You are the best magic.

Author's Note

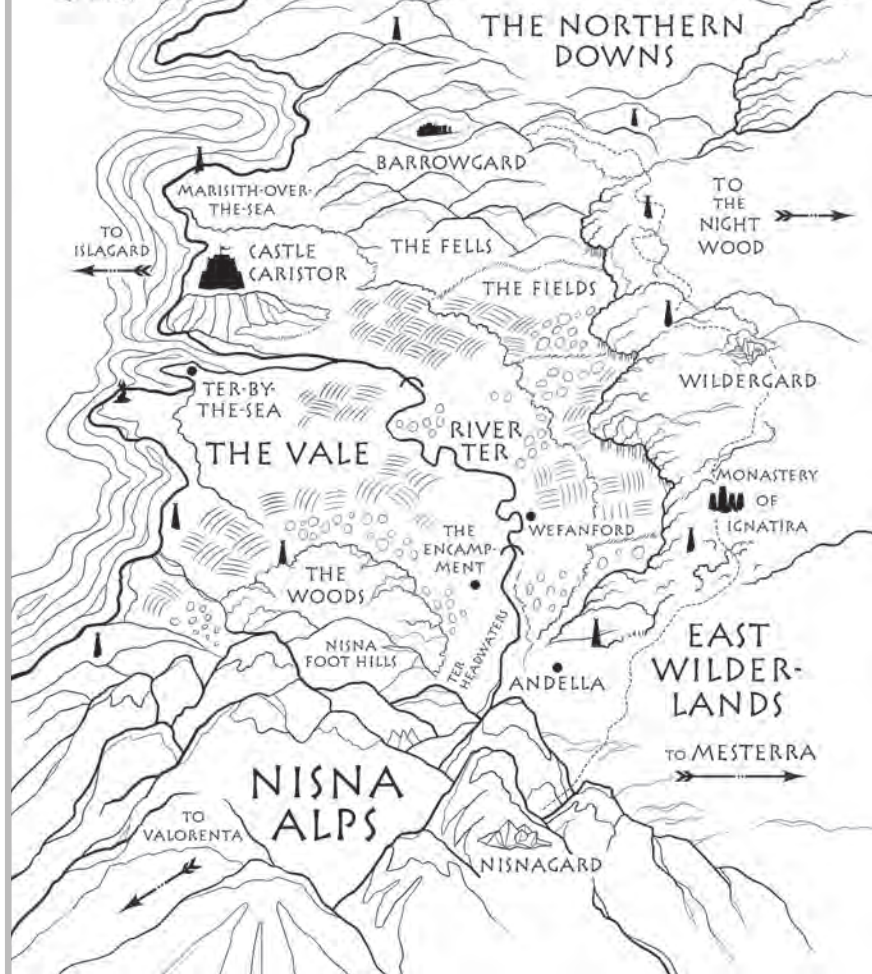
The events in this story are fictional except the British rail crash of October 8, 1952. Three trains collided at Harrow and Wealdstone Station in northwest London, leaving 112 dead and 340 injured—to this day, the deadliest peacetime rail crash in the nation's history.

Likewise, all the characters are fictional, but Professor Kinchurch is based (very loosely) on two historical figures: Constance Savery and Dorothy L. Sayers, two of the first women scholars to receive degrees from Oxford University in 1920. Both were prolific writers.

THE PATHLESS SEA

- VILLAGE
- ▲ WATCHTOWER
- ORCHARDS
- /// FIELDS

TERNIVAL





PART I

When you are young so many things are difficult to believe, and yet the dullest people will tell you that they are true—such things, for instance, as that the earth goes round the sun, and that it is not flat but round. But the things that seem really likely, like fairy-tales and magic, are, so say the grown-ups, not true at all. Yet they are so easy to believe, especially when you see them happening.

—*The Enchanted Castle* by E. NESBIT, 1907

The tales of Mesterra—of its inhabitants and visitors, both good and evil; some who came and went from other worlds; some who came and stayed—are full-told in *The Writ of Queens*. Few have read it, however, for it languishes in an obscure library in Tellus. If you are very lucky, you might stumble upon it and read the stories for yourself.

But here, in the tales of Ternival, we shall follow the stories as yet untold.

—*Ternival: Selected Tales* by A. H. W. CLIFTON, 1940



Chapter



1

In all the old stories, in those fairy tales I still half believed, this was how it happened. Ordinary kids were visiting relatives, maybe. Or stuck at boarding school. Alone. Uncertain. Yearning for adventure. And before long, adventure came to them. They took a wrong turn, were chased away from everything familiar—and suddenly a door opened to another world.

That summer, at age fourteen, I was too old to believe anymore, of course. But the ache, the yearning, was still there.

It never leaves us, really. The question is whether it will become our truest hope or deepest wound.

Or both.



JULY 1995

“Whatever you do,” Mum said as the car swept toward my grandmother’s estate, “don’t mention your father.”

It'd been raining ever since Grandmother's chauffeur, Paxton, had picked us up from the airport. Gray suburbs had eventually given way to crooked villages, then to muddy farms and pasture-lands bordered by dripping hedgerows. Ahead loomed a range of mist-bound hills, moody and mysterious. Like we'd fallen into a fairy tale. Grim but thoroughly enchanting.

I tore my gaze from the window. "Don't mention Dad?" I repeated. "Why not?"

Mum sat rigidly in the back seat next to me, fiddling with the clasp of her handbag. After our long flight, her librarian tweeds were crumpled, her chin-length brown hair disheveled, her small, fine-boned face pale and tense. "Just don't," she said. "Actually, pause, in general, before you speak. Blathering is a habit your grandmother never could stand."

"I don't blather."

She exhaled. "Nosiness, then."

"I'm not nosy." This wasn't strictly true.

"Eva, dear, you're lovely. But she doesn't know that yet."

I held my tongue. I could practice not being nosy, all right. Never mind that my grandmother and I were perfect strangers. Never mind that, until now, there'd been no transatlantic trips between England and Connecticut in all my fourteen years. No phone calls. No birthday cards. And no explanations, despite my many questions.

Mum appraised my ginger-blond curls with another sigh. "It will have to do," she murmured to herself. "If only we could find your *comb* somewhere . . ."

Paxton's glance in the rearview mirror met mine for a second. Silent and morose, like a heron, the old chauffeur hadn't said more than five sentences since we'd left the airport. Those eyes held secrets, I thought. He knew something.

Most visitors bound for the Wolvern Hills would've taken a train, which normally was all my parents could afford. But, I was told, we don't ride trains to meet my grandmother. No explanation for that either—we just don't. Instead, Paxton had met us at Heathrow and loaded our luggage into “the Bentley,” as Mum called it. Now for the past few hours, we'd been winding our way toward my grandmother's estate of Carrick Hall.

I tried to act as though all this was perfectly ordinary. Riding in an actual luxury car driven by an actual chauffeur to an actual English manor house owned by my actual grandmother. As one does. But a bottled-up shriek of excitement bubbled just below the surface.

“There's the village,” Mum said, her voice strained. “Won't be long now.”

The car had begun to climb toward a cluster of terraced stone buildings. I took this to be Upper Wolvern, the tiny village in the West Midlands near where Mum had grown up. We drove over a bridge spanning a chattering stream and onto the narrow high street lined with picturesque shops and cottages. Despite the gloom, flower beds and window boxes exploded with color.

The Bentley climbed up and up, past a half-timbered pub and around a bend lined with stone walls. At a roundabout with a giant boulder in the center, a road branched off to the right, next to a sign that read Wolvern College, est. 1865. The main road continued to the left, but we headed straight onto a narrow lane.

The lane climbed past a rugged church surrounded by blackened, leaning headstones, all of which looked hundreds of years old. Beyond the churchyard ran a high stone wall just as ancient. A stout gatehouse was built into the wall, and beside it, a broad archway opened to a winding drive.

Somewhere down that drive lay Carrick Hall. My mother's childhood home, the storied manor house at the foot of the Wolvern Hills. What little I knew had been pieced together over the years from Mum's rare descriptions, few of them happy. Forty-two rooms, many of them shrouded or empty or locked. A strange landscape of sculpted yews, known as topiaries, which drew tourists from all over the world. Grandfather Torstane, famous art collector, long dead. And Grandmother, a great beauty, all alone save for a handful of staff.

And my mother, Gwendolyn, their only child, gone for twenty years.

Which baffled me. Why leave such a fascinating place? Why abandon such an intriguing family? When questioned, Mum always demurred: "I'll explain someday." Her reticence only made the mystery more tantalizing, my curiosity more insatiable.

But now, I hoped, I'd finally learn everything.

"Ready?" Mum whispered. She seemed a hundred times more nervous than I was.

I took her hand. "Are *you*?"

She squeezed my hand and gazed straight ahead.



Paxton maneuvered the Bentley through the archway. We now followed the course of a stream through a narrow valley of pasturelands and woodlands, ascending all the time. The fog thickened.

We passed an orchard, mist drifting between the trees. A figure emerged, pushing a wheelbarrow: a boy not much older than me. He was lean and black-haired, pale features almost elfin. He nodded at the car as Paxton lifted a hand.

"He *must* be a Stokes," Mum said, looking back.

Paxton nodded. "Aye, that's Frankie Addison. Holly's eldest. Helps his grandfather Stokes with the gardens after school."

"My word," she said, facing forward. "I keep waiting for news that old Stokes has retired, but he never does."

"Stays on for tradition's sake." Unlike *some* people, Paxton's tone suggested. But Mum, if she noticed, ignored it.

"And the boy," Mum continued. "Eldest of five, I believe?"

"Aye, madam. Holly's got her hands full, what with helping daily at the Hall and her Jim gone driving lorries."

"Is he?" Mum said, frowning.

"Not enough work in the Wolverns."

She looked away and pressed her lips together.

"After school?" I whispered to Mum. "Don't kids get the summers off here?"

"What?" she said distractedly. "Oh. Not till later. Schools run on trimesters here, you see—and summer term lasts through the end of July."

The trees cleared, and Carrick Hall rose from the valley like an old gray dragon. Through the fog I could make out a sprawling manor house of high walls and peaked roofs surmounted by a square central tower. Still higher behind it rose those stark, empty hills, half-veiled by swirling clouds. My bottled-up excitement threatened to burst.

As we swept around a circular drive, an enormous green figure loomed out of the mist: a larger-than-life topiary of a snarling wolf. Next to him crouched what appeared to be a gargoyle, expertly sculpted from living greenery. Other fantastical figures now came into view: ogres and dragons, centaurs and sprites, scattered around the grounds, emerging from flower beds and hedgerows. A bizarre menagerie.

“You weren’t kidding about the topiaries,” I murmured.

“I wasn’t kidding about anything,” Mum said.

I glanced upward as the car drew alongside a flight of steps. Near the great front doors stood what looked like a stone statue of a stately older woman in gray—beautiful, with tragic eyes.

The car stopped. We climbed out. The figure stared at me, one hand clutching its chest. Then it gasped raggedly and looked at Mum.

The statue of flesh and blood was my grandmother—and, for a moment, she thought I was the living dead.

“Hullo, Mother,” my own mum said pleasantly. “Paxton made good time, I think. Tea ready?”



Once upon the Warp of Time, Magister the World-Weaver fashioned a flat world. A vast sea spread across it from edge to edge in every direction, and in its center rose a wide landmass of high mountains and deep woodlands, moors and deserts, fens and dales.

Rich was this land, vibrant and lovely.

Magister the World-Weaver then brought forth animals to roam the land, birds to soar the skies, and sea-beasts to ply the waters. So, too, did he make strange creatures, which, in other worlds, are the stuff of legend. Dryads and dwarves, satyrs and centaurs, and wise animals of every kind . . . all woven into being and called to make their home in that fresh new world.

Mesterra, Magister called it. For the land seemed suspended in all the vast blueness between sea and sky like a sparkling jewel.

—*Ternival: Selected Tales* by A. H. W. CLIFTON