

## Bad Candy

**S**ome stories are spoiled from the very beginning.  
Some stories are rotten to the core.

Like the one that killed her mother, Hester thought, as she hustled through the dark forest. Her mother was minding her own business in her candied house, when two young vandals



ate through her roof. Alone in her crib, Hester had woken from a nap and stared into the faces of two ogreish children, fat cheeks slathered in candy and crumbs. They'd taken one look at the baby they'd just orphaned and fled like cowards, leaving a family and home broken. And they'd been *rewarded* for it, hailed as heroes and legends, while her mother burned in an oven. Ever since that day, whenever Hester sensed an injustice, a story gone wrong, she smelled the sick, sour rot of candy.

Just as she smelled it now.

The story in question was a short one, a statement of simple fact, but Hester's whole body bristled, like a cat amongst snakes. She didn't know how long it had been up there, high over the Endless Woods. But after days of traveling underground from Gnomeland, Lionsmane's message was waiting when she'd resurfaced.

The wedding of King Rhian and Princess Sophie will take place as scheduled, this Saturday, at sundown, at Camelot castle. All citizens of the Woods are invited to attend.

It was penned in gold like King Rhian's other messages, set against the clouds. Rhian was a proven liar and every one of his screeds a trap. But this message had none of the pomp of his others. This was stark and simple . . . yet slithery in a way she couldn't put a finger on. . . .

A shadow appeared at her side.

"This is stupid, Hester. We need to turn back *now*," said

Anadil in a black hood that shadowed her white hair and red eyes. “Sophie’s betrayed us. She’s marrying Rhian at sundown. *Tonight*. That’s what the message says. And the sun’s going fast. Either we get back to Camelot and stop this wedding or we all *die*.”

Hester ignored her, spotting the lights of Borna Coric ahead. Once she and her friends entered this new kingdom, they’d need to be careful. Like all citizens of the Woods, those of Borna Coric would be hunting students from the School for Good and Evil.

A second shadow flanked her—

“Ani’s right,” said Dot, also hooded in black. “Plus, there’s no way we’ll get inside those caves: it’s *impossible*. But if we turn back now, we can sneak onto a Flowerground train from Ravenbow. It can take us back to Camelot in time to stop the wedding—”

“And leave *Merlin*?” Hester said. “That was the assignment Reaper gave us. Rescue the wizard from the Caves of Con-tempo. Rescue our best weapon. A wedding is not our mission. Sophie is not our mission. *Merlin* is our mission. And if there’s one thing our coven abides by, it’s doing as we promised.”

She powered forward, but Anadil blocked her path.

“Our promise is pointless if Rhian becomes the One True King!” said the pale witch. “He needs two things. Make all hundred kingdoms burn their rings. And marry Sophie as his queen. Do both and he claims the Storian’s powers. If the wedding is at sundown, that means all the rings are already gone! Rhian marrying Sophie is the last step. That’s what Sophie

told us in Gnomeland. Once she's Rhian's queen, Lionsmane will become the new Storian. Rhian can write anything he wants and make it come true! He can erase kingdoms, kill our friends, kill *us* with a penstroke! Our story will be *over*—"

"All the rings can't be gone because Nottingham still has a ring. Dot's *father* has a ring," Hester noted coldly. "And the Sheriff wouldn't burn his ring for King Rhian. Hates him more than we do. Even if the Sheriff were to die, his ring would go to Dot. And we'll go to the ends of the earth to protect Dot *and* that ring. Just like we're going to do for Merlin." Hester shoved past them, pulling her hood tighter.

"Don't you get it? Sophie's *marrying* him!" Anadil said. "Either to save herself or to be Camelot's queen—"

"You really think Sophie would marry *Rhian*?" Hester challenged. "After helping us *escape* him?"

"That's what Rhian wrote!" Dot argued. "That's what his story says!"

"*His* story," said Hester, glaring at the sky. "There's something fishy about that message. And until I figure out what it is, we're sticking to our plan. Besides, if there's one thing I've learned about Sophie, it's that she's a better witch than all of us. I'm sure she has the king right where she wants him."

"Hester, the sun will set within the hour—" Anadil hounded.

"More reason to find Merlin fast. He's our best chance to defeat Rhian. That's why Rhian trapped him in the caves."

"Then why didn't he just *kill* Merlin? For all we know Merlin's already dead or used his Wizard Wish and this is a

wild goose chase to get us killed too.”

“Wizard Wish?” said Dot. “Is that the wish you make in Aladdin’s cave?”

“That’s a Genie’s Wish, you idiot. No wonder you failed Lesso’s class,” said Anadil. “Wizards all have one wish. They use their Wizard Wish to choose how and when to die—”

“And no way Merlin would have used his wish while we’re still in danger,” Hester scorned, approaching the gates of Borna Coric. “Merlin’s out there. And he needs our help.”

“You’re not thinking, Hester. Let’s say he is in those caves,” Anadil granted. “Caves of Contempo are time traps. Even a few seconds inside and you come out years older. Merlin’s been in there for *weeks*.”

“Go back without me, then,” Hester dared, crossing through the gates—

She stopped short.

So did Anadil and Dot.

The forest floor had disappeared, replaced by the sky instead. No longer were the witches on a dirt path: they were standing on the sunset, a canvas of purple and pink. Lionsmane’s message had moved from high above to down by their feet, paving the way ahead. Each gold letter was the size of a house, carved into the horizon beneath their boots, the announcement of King Rhian’s wedding become the new path. As the witches inched across it, confused into silence, Hester smelled bad candy again, her eyes cast downwards, searching Rhian’s words for the rot at their core. . . .

“Hester?” Dot said, gaping upwards.

Hester blinked.

It wasn't just the sky that had turned upside down.

The whole *kingdom* of Borna Coric was upside down.

She'd known of this topsy-turvy land, where the world swung on its head, but it was quite another thing to see it in real life. Here, the earth was high up in the sky, a ceiling of dirt, and the sky was anchored where the ground should be. Purple beanstalks sprouted downwards from this roof of earth, stretching towards the flat floor of clouds.

Capsized cottages nestled along the beanstalks, the dwellers inside also inverted, together with their furniture and belongings, freed from the laws of gravity. Purple vine ladders and pulleys connected the beanstalks like roads, with a toppled bridge of flowers linking the village to the main square. The witches moved towards this busy arena with levels of overturned shops built between huge upside-down statues. Royal statues, Hester saw now, the stone heads of Borna Coric's king and queen and their children moored to the skyfloor, the statues' feet reaching high over the kingdom. Up close, Hester noticed the king's and queen's sculpted faces looked oddly young. Almost as young as their children.

"Creepy," Anadil murmured. As people bustled above, wrong side up, the two witches stayed hidden in the statues' shadows. "People are going to notice us, Hester. We're the only ones with our heads on straight. Plus, the caves are supposed to be surrounded by a poisonous sea. I don't see *water*, let alone a sea, do you?"

"Must be behind all this," Hester said on tiptoes, glimpsing

nothing but more shops and statues ahead. “We have to sneak through without anyone recognizing us.”

“And then cross a poisonous sea that we can’t even find,” Anadil added. “Not to mention trespass into cursed caves.”

“If you had your rats to scout, you’d be useful instead of a ball and chain,” said Hester.

“One is dead. One is missing. The other found Merlin and told Dovey where he is. My rat is the reason we’re here. So who’s the useful one?” Ani snapped back.

But Hester was already prowling forward, craning up at the floors of upside-down storefronts. Inside Borna’s Bread, upturned shoppers filled carts with baguettes and brioches and bottom-up cakes, while inside Toppled Tailors, flurries of purple moths flew mended clothes from reversed racks to waiting customers. Next door, in Sylvie’s Salon, men and women sat in upended chairs, perusing newspapers, as floating sylphs cut their hair, none of the patrons’ faces the slightest bit swollen, as if their bodies were born to live in the wrong direction.

“Isn’t the world upside down enough without it actually being upside down?” Anadil marveled.

“Maybe they see things clearer that way,” Hester said.

“Eh, I’d say this group is as blind as the rest,” said Anadil.

Hester followed her friend’s eyes to a domed theater hanging from the tip of a purple beanstalk like a Christmas bauble—the “Borna Bowl,” said the marquee—with the dome inverted and a full audience seated downside up, watching a spellcast of King Rhian’s coronation replaying in phantoms of gray light. As the spellcast rehashed the familiar scene, Rhian



clutching Sophie, his princess clad in a prim, ruffled dress, the spectators hung on the king's every word, while heads-down vendors hawked Lion memorabilia: mugs, shirts, hats, pins. . . .

"Is this what they do for entertainment? Watch that scum's coronation again and again?" Hester asked, unable to hear Rhian's speech from this far away.

"Probably plays every hour on the hour," said Anadil, tilting her head for better viewing. "Strange, though. I don't remember them spellcasting the coronation."

A brown-skinned family in colorful smocks passed by on the skyroad, heads up like the witches, ogling the Borna Bowl and the rest of the upside-down realm. *Drupathi tourists*, Hester thought, she and Ani forcing smiles, which the family returned before giving Dot weird looks. Dot, who was lurking behind, sucking morosely on vine leaves she'd turned to chocolate with her lit finger.

"People will notice your glow!" Hester hissed, pulling her into the shadows. "And stop sulking!"

"It's just . . . what you said back there . . .," Dot puled. "If Daddy dies, Nottingham's ring *doesn't* go to me. He changed his will after I freed Robin Hood. Don't think he ever changed it back." She turned more leaves to chocolate, her lit finger trembling. "If Rhian's marrying Sophie, maybe Rhian already got Daddy's ring. Because of *me*. Because Daddy didn't trust me with it. Which means, because of me, Daddy might be . . . might be . . ."

For the first time, Hester's cold facade softened. "That's not how this coven thinks," she said, cupping her hand over Dot's



glow and snuffing it out. “Focus on everything we’ve done to get here. Each of us did our part. Wolves wouldn’t have helped us if you hadn’t bribed them with chocolate snow. That magic carpet wouldn’t have snuck us through tunnels if Ani hadn’t threatened it with an unspooling spell. We’re still alive, Dot. We’re almost to Merlin. Whatever your Dad thought of you when he changed his will, he doesn’t think of you that way now. He loves you, Dot. Enough to join forces with Robin Hood—his own Nemesis—to keep you safe. Wherever he is, he’d want you to finish our mission.”

Dot mulled this over, gazing at her shoes, before she took a deep breath and tossed her chocolate away. “For the record, I still think Sophie went back to Rhian. Just like the message says. Same story as when she went back to Rafal. Spends too much time around Agatha and Tedros together, gets jealous and desperate and ends up kissing any boy who’ll have her, even a lying, murdering pig.”

“Could be worse,” said Hester. “Could be kissing a Snake.”

Dot snorted.

A chill gusted through the square, huddling the witches deeper into their hoods and shivering the spellcast in the dome. Then Hester smelled something on the breeze . . . something that made her muscles tense and her demon twitch. . . .

“The sea,” she said, pivoting to her friends. “It’s close.”

She led them ahead, the three girls gliding along the darkening skyfloor like bats, careful to avoid the glow of overturned lanterns sparking to life along the beanstalks. Hester navigated the coven past the Borna Bowl, hearing Rhian’s

voice grow louder, the salty scent of the sea burning stronger and stronger. . . .

“Wait! Look at her dress!” Dot blurted.

“Shhh!” Ani whispered.

“But that’s not what Sophie wore at Rhian’s coronation,” Dot pressed. “You sure it’s a replay?”

Hester stopped cold.

So did Anadil.

They cocked their heads in unison, studying the inverted spellcast as Rhian held Sophie in close-up, the king’s and princess’s figures translucent.

“Citizens of the Woods, I did not expect a day like today to come. This morning, I learned that Japeth of Foxwood, my brother, my liege, has been in league with Tedros and Agatha, plotting against my throne,” spoke Rhian. “I thought my brother was the Eagle to my Lion. Instead, he was just another Snake. But the Lion always wins. By the time you view this spellcast, Japeth will be sealed in the dungeons and shall never be seen again. Our Woods is under siege by rebels and even my own blood can’t be trusted. I alone can protect us. I alone shall punish our enemies. I alone will keep these Woods safe.”

“Dot’s right. This isn’t from the coronation,” said Anadil. “This is . . . *now*.”

“Ding Dong, the Snake is gone,” Dot chimed. “At least Rhian did one thing right.”

But Hester was still studying the king: the chill of his voice, the void in his eyes, the shudder of threads on his jacket like sliding scales. . . . Next to him, Sophie wore a blank smile, like

a puppet pulled by strings. The king clasped her tighter.

“But a traitor cannot stop our kingdom from glory,” he said. “And though I have lost a liege, soon I will gain a queen. My wedding to my true love will proceed as scheduled, and we shall spellcast it for the Woods to see. I make this promise to you all. With Sophie and I united, *everything* in our world will be possible.”

He looked at Sophie, who maintained her perfect smile and spoke directly into the spellcast.

“Long live the Lion!” she proclaimed. “Long live the One True King!”

The scene froze on their image before words magically imposed over it.

## THE WEDDING OF KING RHIAN AND PRINCESS SOPHIE

*Live Spellcast will begin in 30 minutes*

“See, we were right!” Dot whispered to Anadil. “Sophie is marrying Rhian!”

But Hester was fixed on the frozen image of Rhian, honing in on the black holes of his pupils, the serpentine curl of his lips. . . . Slowly Hester’s gaze moved to Sophie, trapped in his arms, the light in her eyes extinguished, the witch dead and gone.

Suddenly Hester smelled it again.

That sour, sick rot, overwhelming her.

Bad candy.

“Snake is the Lion . . . Lion is the Snake. . .” Hester realized softly.

Anadil frowned. “Hester?”

“What is it?” Dot pushed.

The tattooed witch turned to them, face pale.

“The world really *is* upside down.”