









## The Lady and the Snake

**W**hen the new King of Camelot intends to kill your true love, kidnap your best friend, and hunt you down like a dog . . . you better have a plan.

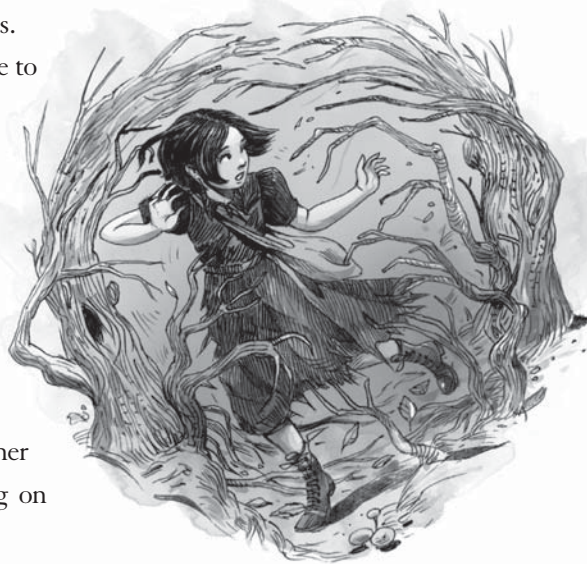
But Agatha had no plan.

She had no allies.

She had no place to hide.

So she ran.

She ran as far from Camelot as she could with no direction or destination, ripping through the Endless Woods, her black dress catching on



nettles and branches as the sun rose and fell . . . She ran as the bag with a Dean's crystal ball swung and thumped against her ribs . . . She ran as WANTED posters with her face began appearing on trees, a warning that news traveled faster than her legs could carry her and that there was nowhere safe for her anymore . . .

By the second day, her feet blistered; her muscles throbbed, fed only by berries and apples and mushrooms she snatched along the way. She seemed to be going in circles: the smoky riverbanks of Mahadeva, the borders of Gillikin, then back to Mahadeva in the pale dawn. She couldn't think about a plan or shelter. She couldn't think about the present at all. Her thoughts were in the past: *Tedros in chains . . . sentenced to die . . . her friends imprisoned . . . Merlin dragged away unconscious . . . an Evil villain wearing Tedros' crown . . .*

She struggled through an assault of pink fog, searching for the path. Wasn't Gillikin the kingdom with the pink fog? Hadn't Yuba the Gnome taught them that at school? But she'd left Gillikin hours ago. How could she be there again? She needed to pay attention . . . she needed to think *forward* instead of backward . . . but now all she could see were clouds of pink fog taking the shape of the Snake . . . that masked, scale-covered boy who she'd been sure was dead . . . but a boy who she'd just seen alive . . .

By the time she came out of her thoughts, the fog was gone and it was nighttime. Somehow she'd ended up in the Stymph Forest, with no trace of a path. A storm swept in, slinging lightning through trees. She cowered under an overgrown toadstool.

Where should she go? Who could help her when everyone she trusted was locked in a dungeon? She'd always relied on her intuition, her ability to make a plan on the spot. But how could she think of a plan when she didn't even know who she was fighting?

*I saw the Snake dead.*

*But then he wasn't . . .*

*And Rhian was still onstage . . .*

*So Rhian can't be the Snake.*

*The Snake is someone else.*

*They're working together.*

*The Lion and the Snake.*

She thought of Sophie, who'd giddily accepted Rhian's ring, thinking she was marrying Tedros' knight. Sophie who believed she'd found love—*real* love that saw the Good in her—only to be taken hostage by a villain far more Evil than she.

At least Rhian wouldn't hurt Sophie. Not yet. He needed her.

What for, Agatha didn't know.

But Rhian would hurt Tedros.

Tedros, who'd heard Agatha tell Sophie last night that he'd been a failure as king. Tedros, who now doubted whether his own princess believed in him. Tedros, who'd lost his crown, his kingdom, his people, and was trapped in the hands of his enemy, who just yesterday he'd embraced like a brother. An enemy who now claimed to *be* his brother.

Agatha's stomach wrenched. She needed to hold Tedros

in her arms and tell him that she loved him. That she would never doubt him again. That she would trade her life for his if she could.

*I'll save you, Agatha thought desperately. Even if I have no plan and no one on my side.*

Until then, Tedros had to stay strong, no matter what Rhian and his men did to him. Tedros had to find a way to stay alive.

If he wasn't dead already.

In a flash, Agatha was running again, strobed by lightning as she slashed through the last of the Stymph Forest and then along Akgul's haunted beaches with ash for sand. Dovey's crystal ball weighed her down, pounding the same bruise in her flank again and again. She needed to rest . . . she hadn't slept in days . . . but her mind was spinning like a broken wheel . . .

*Rhian pulled Excalibur from the stone.*

*That's why he's king.*

Agatha ran faster.

*But how?*

*The Lady of the Lake told Sophie that the Snake was king.*

*But Excalibur thought Rhian was king.*

*And Arthur told Tedros that Tedros was king.*

*Something's wrong.*

*Magically wrong.*

Agatha held her breath, lost in a maze of thoughts. She needed help. She needed *answers*.

Muggy warmth turned to harsh wind and then to snow, the forest opening up in a sweep of tundra. In her sleepless haze, she wondered if she'd run through months and seasons. . . .



But now she could see the shadow of a castle in the distance, spires slicing through low-flying clouds.

*Camelot?*

After all this, instead of finding someone who could help her, had she run back to danger? Had she wasted all this time?

Tears rising, she backed away, turning to sprint again—

But she couldn't run anymore.

Her legs buckled and Agatha crumpled into soft snow, her black dress fanned around her like a bat's wings. Sleep came as hard and swift as a hammer.

She dreamed of a leaning tower stretched high into the clouds, built out of a thousand gold cages. Trapped in every cage was a friend or someone she loved—Merlin, Guinevere, Lancelot, Professor Dovey, Hester, Anadil, Dot, Kiko, Hort, her mother, Stefan, Professor Sader, Lady Lesso, and more—with all the cages teetering one over the other, and Sophie's and Tedros' cages at the very top, poised to come crashing down first. As the tower shook and swayed, Agatha threw herself against it to keep it from falling, her scrawny, gangly frame the only thing stopping her friends from dashing to their deaths. But just as she had the soaring column in hand, a shadow emerged atop the highest cage. . . .

Half-Lion. Half-Snake.

One by one, it threw cages off the tower.

Agatha woke with a start, sopped in sweat despite the snow. Raising her head, she saw the storm had passed, the castle ahead now clear in morning sun.

In front of it, two iron gates swung open and shut against

the rocks, the entrance to this white fortress that towered over a calm, gray lake.

Agatha's heart jumped.

Not Camelot.

*Avalon.*

Something inside her had steered her here.

To the one person who could give her answers.

Something inside her had a plan all along.



“HELLO?” AGATHA CALLED OUT TO THE STILL WATERS.

Nothing happened.

“Lady of the Lake?” she tried again.

Not even a ripple.

Edginess fluttered in her chest. Once upon a time, the Lady of the Lake had been Good's greatest ally. That's why Agatha's soul had brought her here. To get help.

But Chaddick had come to the Lady of the Lake for help too.

He'd ended up dead.

Agatha looked up at the zigzagging staircase that ascended towards the circle of white towers. The last time she'd come to these shores, she'd been with Sophie, searching for Chaddick's body. Dark dregs of blood still stained the snow where they'd found Tedros' murdered knight, clutching a taunting message from the Snake.

Agatha had never seen the Snake's face. But the Lady of the Lake had seen it when she'd kissed him.

A kiss that had leeches the Lady's powers and betrayed King Tedros.

A kiss that had helped the Snake put a traitor on Tedros' throne.

Because that's what Rhian was. A filthy traitor, who'd pretended to be Tedros' knight when he was in league with the Snake the whole time.

Agatha turned back to the water. The Lady of the Lake had protected that Snake. And not just protected him: she'd fallen in *love* with him and lost her powers because of it. She'd thrown away a lifetime of duty. A sick feeling slid up Agatha's spine. The Lady of the Lake should have been immune to Evil's charms. But instead, she could no longer be trusted.

Agatha swallowed hard.

*I shouldn't be here*, she thought.

And yet . . . there was no one else to turn to. She had to take a chance.

"It's me, Agatha!" she bellowed. "Merlin's friend. He needs your help!"

Her voice echoed across the shore.

Then the lake shuddered.

Agatha leaned forward. She saw nothing except her own reflection in the silvery surface.

But then her face in the water began to change.

Little by little, Agatha's reflection morphed into a shriveled

old hag's, with knots of white hair clinging to a bald head and spotted skin sagging off cheekbones. The hag loomed beneath the lake like a troll under a bridge, glaring up at Agatha with cold eyes. Her voice carried through the water, low and distorted—

“We made a *deal*. I *answered* Merlin's question,” the Lady of the Lake seethed. “I let him ask me one thing—*one* thing—and in return, he would never come again. So now he tries to weasel out of our deal by sending *you*? Go. You're not welcome here.”

“He didn't send me!” Agatha fought. “Merlin's a *prisoner*! There's a new king of Camelot named Rhian—he's trapped Tedros, Merlin, Professor Dovey, and all our friends in the dungeons. And Merlin's been hurt! He'll die if I don't save him! Tedros will too! Arthur's son. The *true* king.”

There was no alarm or horror or even sympathy in the Lady's face. There was . . . nothing.

“Didn't you hear me? You have to help them!” Agatha begged. “You swore to protect the King—”

“And I *did* protect him,” the Lady retorted. “I told you when you came here last. The green-masked boy had the blood of Arthur in his veins. And not just the blood of Arthur's son. The blood of Arthur's *eldest* son. I could smell it when I had my powers. I know the blood of the One True King.” She paused, her face clouding. “He had powers too, this boy. Strong powers. He sensed my secret: that I've grown lonely here, protecting the kingdom, protecting Good, in this cold, watery grave . . . alone . . . always alone. He knew that I would trade my magic for love if only someone gave me the chance.

And he was offering me that chance. A chance Arthur never gave me. For a single kiss, the boy promised I could be free of this life . . . I could go with him to Camelot. I could have love. I could have someone to call my own, just like you. . . .” She glanced away from Agatha, hunching deeper. “I didn’t know that giving up my powers would mean *this*. That I’d end an old crone, more alone than before. I didn’t know his promise meant nothing.” Her eyes sealed over. “But that is his right, of course. He is the king. And I serve the king.”

“Except the king *isn’t* the boy you kissed! *Rhian* is king! The boy they’re calling the Lion,” Agatha insisted. “That wasn’t the boy who came here! The boy you kissed was the *Snake*. He kissed you to strip your magic and rob Good of your power. He kissed you to help the *Lion* become king. Don’t you see? He *tricked* you! And now I need to know who that Snake is. Because if you can be tricked, so can Excalibur! And if Excalibur was tricked, then that’s how an Evil villain ended up on Tedros’ throne—”

The Lady of the Lake lurched towards Agatha, her decayed face just beneath the surface. “No one tricked me. The boy I kissed had Arthur’s blood. The boy I kissed was the *king*. So if it was the ‘Snake’ I kissed, as you call him, then it is the Snake who rightly pulled Excalibur from the stone and now sits on the throne.”

“But the Snake didn’t pull Excalibur! That’s what I’m trying to tell you!” Agatha hounded. “*Rhian* did! And I saw the Snake *there*! They’re working together to con the people of the Woods. That’s how they duped you and the sword—”

The Lady tore through the water. “I smelled his blood. I smelled a *king*,” her voice resounded like thunder. “And even if I can be ‘duped,’ as you so boldly claim, Excalibur *cannot*. No one can outwit Good’s most powerful weapon. Whoever pulled Excalibur from the stone is Arthur’s blood heir. It was the same boy I protected. *He* is the rightful king . . . not the one you and Merlin defend.”

She began to sink into the water.

“You can’t go,” Agatha gasped. “You can’t let them die.”

The Lady of the Lake paused, her skull shining underwater like a pearl. This time, when she looked up, the ice in her eyes had thawed. All Agatha saw was sadness.

“Whatever trouble Merlin and your friends have gotten into is their own doing. Their fates are in the hands of the Storian now,” the Lady said softly. “I buried that boy Chaddick as you asked. I helped Merlin like he wanted. I have nothing left. So please . . . just go. I can’t help you.”

“Yes, you can,” Agatha pleaded. “You’re the only one who’s seen the Snake’s face. You’re the only one who knows who he is. If you show me what the Snake looks like, I can find out where he and Rhian come from. I can prove to the people that they’re liars! I can prove that Tedros belongs on the throne—”

“What’s done is done,” said the Lady of the Lake. “My loyalty is to the king.”

She sank deeper—

“Would the true king hurt Merlin?” Agatha cried out. “Would Arthur’s heir break his promise to you and leave you

like *this*? You say Excalibur makes no mistakes, but *you* made Excalibur and *you* made a mistake. You know you did. Look at you! Please. Listen to me. Truth has become Lies and Lies the Truth. Good and Evil have become one and the same. A Lion and a Snake worked together to steal the crown. Even your sword can't tell what makes a king anymore. Somewhere inside you, you know I speak the Truth. The *real* Truth. All I'm asking for is the Snake's face. Tell me what the boy you kissed looks like. Give me the answer to my question and I'll never return. The same deal you made with Merlin. And I swear to you: this deal will be kept."

The Lady of the Lake locked eyes with Agatha. Deep in the water, the nymph treaded silently, tattered robes splayed like a dead jellyfish. Then she faded down into its depths and disappeared.

"No," Agatha whispered.

She dropped to her knees in the snow and put her face in her hands. She had no wizard, no Deans, no prince, no friends to rely on. She had nowhere to go. No one to turn to. And now Good's last hope had deserted her.

She thought of her prince lashed in chains. . . . She thought of Rhian clutching Sophie, his bride and prisoner. . . . She thought of the Snake, leering at her in the castle, like this was only the beginning. . . .

A burble came from the lake.

She peeked through her fingers to see a scroll of parchment floating towards her.

Heart throbbing, Agatha snatched the scroll and pulled it open.

The Lady had given her an answer.

“But . . . but this is *impossible* . . .,” she blurted, looking back at the lake.

The silence only thickened.

She blinked back at the wet scroll: a bold, inked painting of a beautiful boy.

A boy Agatha knew.

She shook her head, baffled.

Because Agatha had asked the Lady of the Lake to draw the Snake’s face. The Snake who’d kissed the Lady and left her to rot. The Snake who’d killed Agatha’s friends and hidden behind a mask. The Snake who’d joined forces with Rhian and made him king.

Only the Lady of the Lake hadn’t drawn the Snake’s face at all.

She’d drawn Rhian’s.