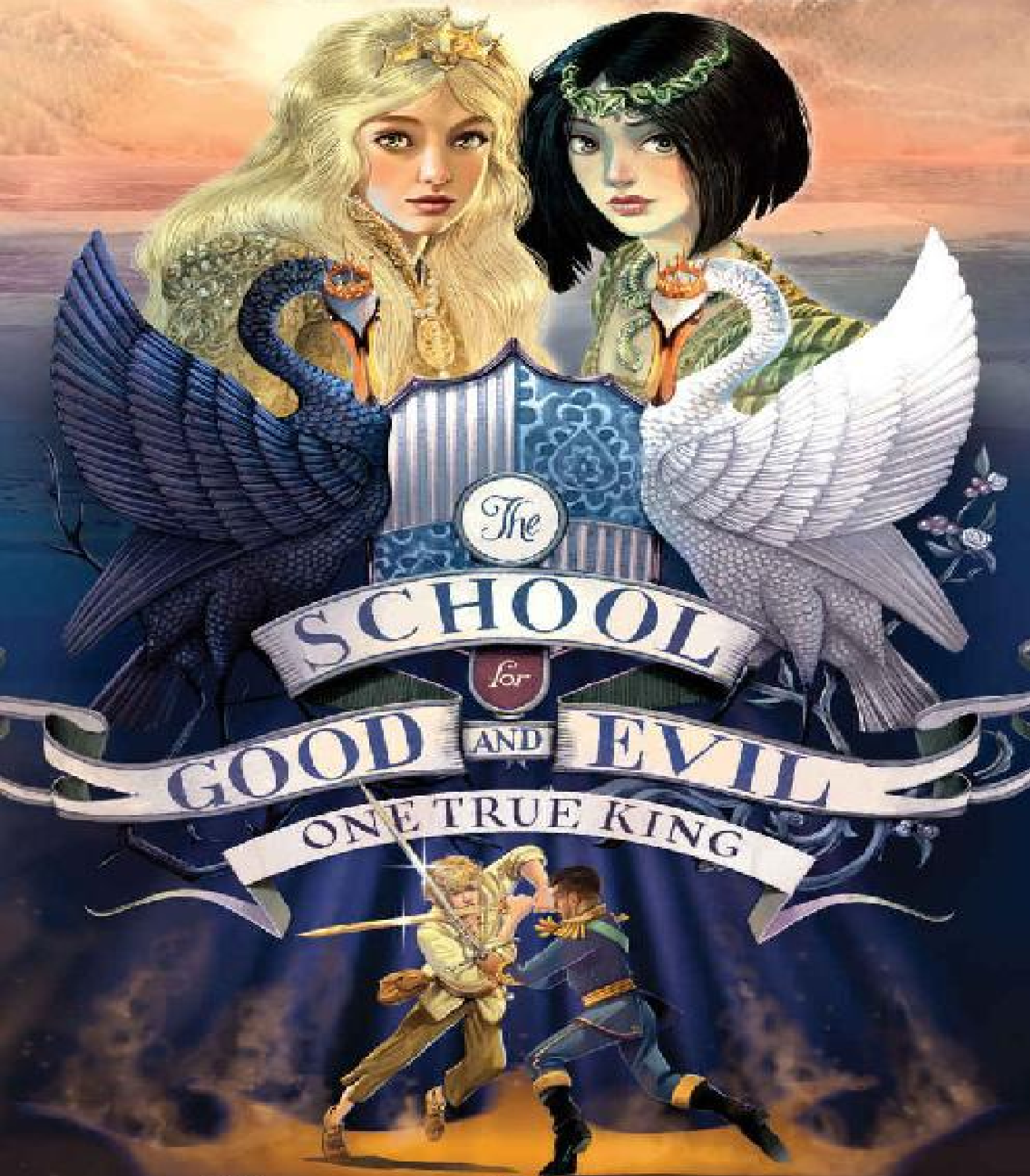
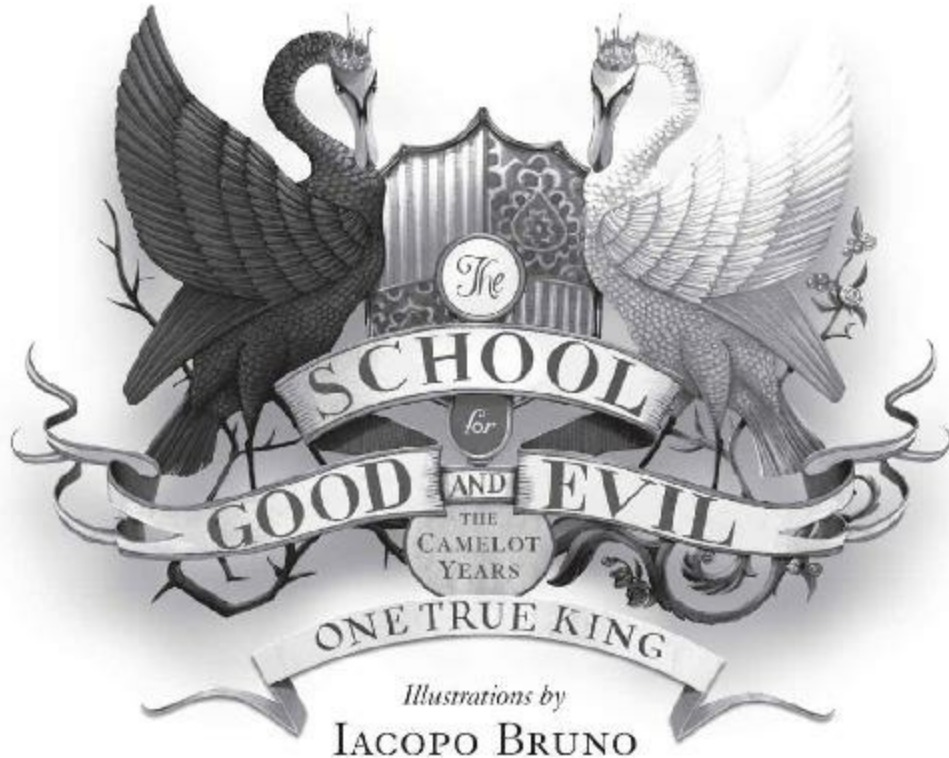


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES



SOMAN CHAINANI

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Dedication

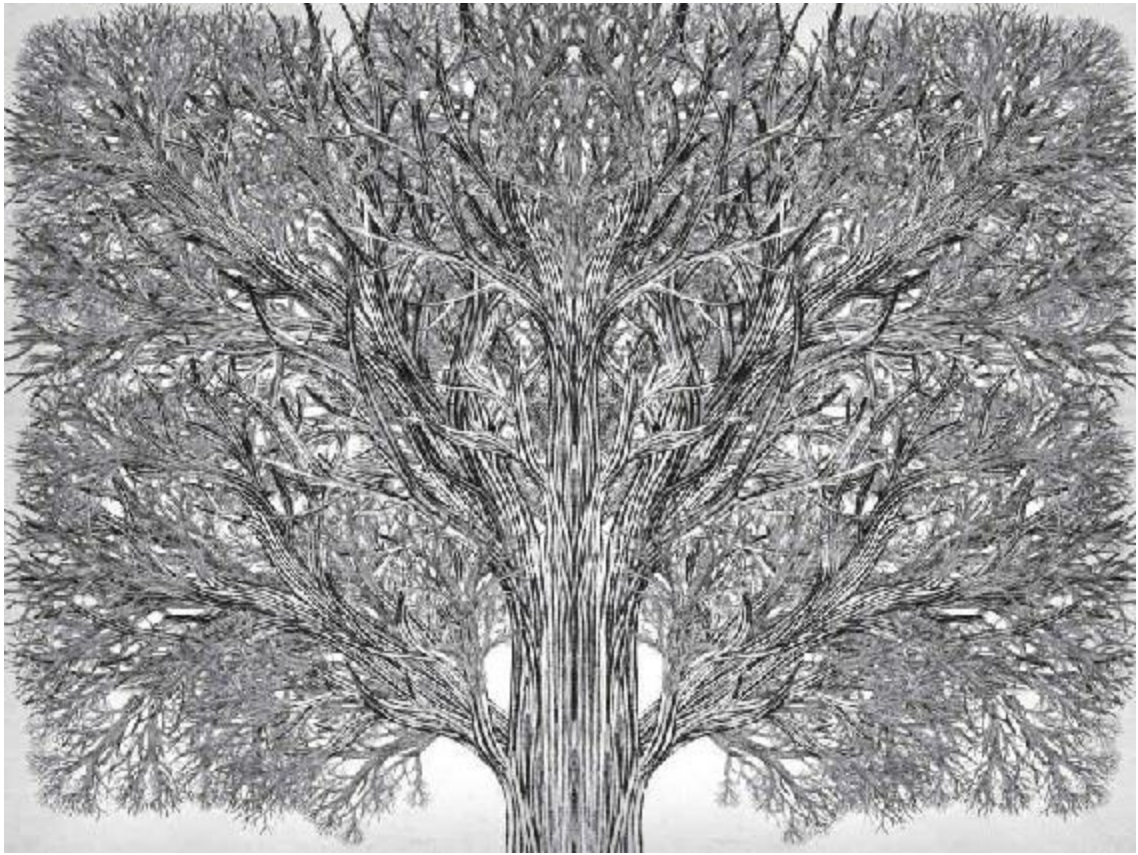


For all the Readers, Good & Evil

Epigraph



IN THE FOREST PRIMEVAL
A SCHOOL FOR GOOD AND EVIL
TWO TOWERS LIKE TWIN HEADS
ONE FOR THE PURE
ONE FOR THE WICKED
TRY TO ESCAPE YOU'LL ALWAYS FAIL
THE ONLY WAY OUT IS
THROUGH A FAIRY TALE



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THE COVEN

Bad Candy

Some 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 Contempo. 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