

Gargoules



GUARDIANS OF THE SOURCE



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Gargoules

GUARDIANS OF THE SOURCE



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Set in 10/16pt Kingfisher by Becky Chilcott.

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*For Bernardo, my fellow Dreamer
May our dreams grow ever brighter.*







I

Gargoyle's Rest

"I can't wait for you to see it," said Mum. "You're going to love it."

It sounded a lot like an instruction.

Callen shoved the stack of duvets aside to peer through the windscreen. High stone walls lay ahead and beyond them, a twisted tangle of trees. Gargoyle's Rest looked like a place that had been forgotten. Probably for good reason.

Dad wasn't having much luck getting the gates open. Rusted shut, by the look of them – like they didn't want to let anyone in.

That was fine by Callen. He didn't want to be here.

He sat back and huffed on the car window, blotting out the view, then drew a pair of fangs with the tip of his finger.

He was pretty sure he was going to hate it here.

Dad hauled the iron gates open with a screech and reappeared at the car door, dusting flakes of paint from his hands before sliding behind the wheel.

“Onwards!” he declared. “Our new life awaits!”

Mum smiled fondly at him and Callen rolled his eyes.

The car nosed forwards into the driveway, jolting and squeaking in protest at the potholes. Shadows reached inside the car, painting crooked lines across the dashboard. Callen squinted through the overgrown laurel hedge, trying to get a glimpse of the house up ahead.

Nan’s house.

Now their house.

Why that meant they had to live here, Callen didn’t understand. Surely they could have just sold it? But no. Mum and Dad had decided to pack everything up and move here. Without even asking him.

As the car rounded the final curve in the driveway, Callen’s eyes widened. It was huge! More like a mansion than a house – three stories tall, the windows barely visible behind a thick mat of vines. Its walls were topped with a series of statues. Dragons, maybe? Monsters? It was hard to tell at this distance.

“Here we are. Our new home!” said Mum. “Impressive old place, isn’t it?”

Callen quickly rearranged his face into a scowl. “Old is right.”

Dad glanced back at Callen and pressed his lips together in sympathy. “It was beautiful, before. It will be again.”

Callen looked critically at the massive building. Several of

the windows were broken. The stone ledges were cracked and crumbling. One of the drainpipes was dangling, dripping listlessly into the flower-bed below. "It looks about ready to fall down."

"It needs a bit of work, for sure," said Dad. "But that's why *we're* here. Inject a bit of energy into it; bring it back to life." He opened the car door. "Out you get! Time to go and get the measure of the place."

Or, thought Callen, we could turn around and go home?

Except they couldn't, could they?

The red 'Sold' rectangle on the estate agent sign had made that very clear. No going back. The new people were probably moving into their old house right now; turning lights on and off; poking around; choosing who'd get to have his room.

Callen clambered out, dragging his rucksack behind him.

The front porch was almost completely hidden behind a trailing curtain of ivy. Dad pushed the greenery aside to fit the key in the lock, then pushed open the door.

"In you go!" he said with a smile. "I'm going to start unloading."

The hallway inside was cavernous – probably as big as their whole ground floor back home. The stained-glass windows on either side of the front door smeared greens and reds across the tiled floor. A massive fern towered on one side of the hallway, its leaves crispy and brown. A gauze of dust covered everything. Callen sneezed.

"Bless you!" said Mum, coming in behind him. "So? What do you think?"

"It's massive," said Callen, unable to keep the awe from his voice. He walked deeper into the silent hall, his nerves humming

with the irrational sense that something might jump out at any moment.

Staircases swept up on both sides of the hall, heading back to a landing over the front door. On the right was a wide umbrella stand. Above it, a rack of swords hung on the wall, their blades gleaming dully in the dim light. Callen was very tempted to get one down. He'd definitely feel braver exploring with a real sword in his hand. But he was pretty sure Mum would say no.

Maybe later, when she wasn't watching his every move.

At the far end of the hall, gloomy corridors led off left and right. In the centre, facing the front door, was a grand pair of double doors. As Callen got closer, he frowned.

Someone had nailed them shut.

It looked like it had been done in a hurry, with some of the nails bent and left sticking out of the surface – big hefty nails, driven right through the smooth paintwork of the doors and into the frame, raising little crowns of splinters.

Surely Nan couldn't have done this?

Callen pictured her as a frail old lady, not some muscular, hammer-wielding type. Maybe he'd imagined her all wrong.

Even so, why would she nail a room shut? Why not just lock it? He rattled the handles, just as Dad kicked open the front door, making him jump.

"You can't go in there," called Dad, peering over an armful of boxes.

Callen's heart tripped guiltily, though he'd done nothing wrong. "Why is it nailed shut?"

"It's not safe," said Dad, matter-of-factly.

Mum raised her eyebrows and walked over to look. “What’s in there?”

“The old ballroom,” said Dad.

“We have a ballroom?” Callen gaped at him.

“We should sign up for dancing lessons,” said Mum with a chuckle. “What do you reckon, Callen?”

Callen frowned. *Not likely.*

Still, he was curious to see inside the mysterious ballroom. Maybe if he went around the back of the house, he’d be able to see in through the windows . . .

Dad crouched and set the boxes down on the floor. “Give us a hand, Callen. Mum’s claimed the drawing room as her studio space, so anything marked ‘Art’ goes in there.” He headed back outside.

Great. Now he had to heave boxes around, too?

Mum hitched the cool bag up on her shoulder and picked up one of the boxes. Callen picked up the other and followed her along the corridor.

Mum opened the next door along from the ballroom and went inside. She set the box down on a spindly-looking table, then twirled on the spot, taking in the high ceilings, the ornate plasterwork, the tall glass doors. “Isn’t it grand?! It’s going to make a wonderful studio.”

Callen snorted softly. ‘Wonderful’ was a stretch. The room was haunted by an eggy smell and the vines in front of the windows filled the corners with murky gloom.

Mum sighed, clearly disappointed by his lack of enthusiasm. “Lunch,” she said, firmly. “You’ll feel better when you’ve eaten.”

Like everything can be solved by food. Callen folded his arms and turned towards the glass doors.

“Can you see the lake?” said Mum, unzipping the cool bag. “Dad told me he used to go fishing on it as a boy.”

“Yes.” Callen could just make out a gleam of water in the distance, but the view was largely obscured by leaves. Some of them even seemed to be growing on the inside of the glass.

“Here we are. Picnic lunch!” said Mum, brightly. “Come and sit down.”

All the furniture looked too fancy to be used. Callen perched himself awkwardly on the edge of a velvet chair.

“Right, I’d better help Dad get the rest in from the car,” said Mum, dusting her hands off. Callen picked up the sandwich and nodded silently, struck dumb by the strangeness of it all.

This is my home now.

It didn’t feel like his. The whole place felt like it belonged to itself and nobody else.

As soon as Mum had gone, Callen got up, sandwich in hand. The leaves were, in fact, growing on the inside of the glass, he discovered. The vines had pushed their way through the hinges, sending thin tendrils of green across the wooden shutters.

He meandered over to a sideboard covered in photos, some in black and white. Lots of faces. None that he recognised. Until he found his own face staring back at him. He leant closer. A whole row of school photos, tracking his progress through Beech Primary, all the way from reception to the most recent one, taken at the start of year 6.

So, Nan knew about him, even if he didn’t know about her.

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Callen frowned.

Weird.

He wished he'd met Nan. And now it made even less sense that he hadn't. Why would Mum and Dad send her school photos, but not bring him to visit?

And Dad had never said anything about growing up in a mansion!

Now he thought about it, Dad had never talked much about his side of the family. Still, Callen wouldn't have guessed he was hiding this many secrets.

Something rustled behind the sideboard and the hairs on Callen's neck stood on end. A rat? He hurriedly stuffed the last of his sandwich into his mouth and headed back outside.

As he reached the front door, a loud beeping echoed up the driveway. "That's the removals truck reversing," said Mum. "Do you think they'll fit through the—"

A loud metallic screech answered that question.

Dad immediately began to jog towards the sound and Mum tutted. "I hope they're more careful than that when it comes to unloading..."



2

Moving Day

With the removals van parked at the top of the driveway, the mountain of boxes in the hall rapidly grew. Mum stood at the foot of the stairs, directing what was to go where and squawking whenever anyone scuffed the walls or put a box down too heavily.

For a while, Callen helped. At least when he was carrying boxes upstairs, he was out of the worst of the mayhem. It also gave him a solid excuse to poke around. Nobody noticed when he didn't come back.

It was easy to avoid being spotted. Whenever the removals people came stomping up the stairs, he just ducked out of sight.

He spent a while exploring the first floor. The room

above the ballroom was some sort of sitting room, the furniture draped with dustsheets, like lumpen Halloween ghosts. A huge portrait hung above the fireplace – a dark-eyed man in leather armour, posing in front of a stained glass window. One of his hands rested on the hilt of his sword, the other on a fearsome stone gargoyle. The gargoyle looked a bit like a grizzly bear, but with scales instead of fur. ‘Guardian with gargoyle 1492’ read a small plaque on the frame.

Of course! Gargoyle’s Rest. Gargoyles. That’s what those statues were on the roof.

The whole place had the feel of a museum, Callen decided. An abandoned museum.

Most of the other rooms on the first floor were bedrooms, though they obviously hadn’t been used for ages. The air was musty and the corners were draped with cobwebs. He discovered Nan’s bedroom at the end of the corridor – pastel green and frilly, with a lingering smell of old-lady perfume.

The last room he went into was different. It looked lived in, or at least looked after. There were blue pyjamas folded on the pillow and a hairbrush on the bedside table. But what drew his attention, was the wall behind the bed.

It was corkboard from floor to ceiling and covered in sketches. Graphic-novel-style artwork, in black ink, with occasional splashes of bright colours; plants and flowers, some of people, but mostly detailed close-ups of gargoyles.

Whoever drew these was really, really good.

But whose room was it? As far as Callen knew, nobody had lived here but Nan.

The lefthand wall was taken up by two tall bookshelves, with a writing desk between them. Callen ran his finger along the spines of the books. He recognised a few of the titles: *Frankenstein*, *The Dark is Rising*, *Winnie-the-Pooh*. Nothing that grabbed him, and too much of a mixture to tell him much about who'd read them. The fronts of the shelves were lined with treasures: acorns, a small antler, a selection of feathers, a burnished black stone that looked like a bit like a claw. He ran his finger along its smooth curve, but left it where it was.

He slid open the drawers of the writing desk. The first was full of paint brushes and pens. In the second, was a leather-bound journal.

Callen flipped through the pages with a thrill of satisfaction. Inside was a mixture of tiny handwriting and sketches like the ones on the wall over the bed. Clues. Proper clues about who had lived here; maybe about Nan, too.

This was more like it.

Something fluttered to the floor and he stooped to pick it up; a blue fish scale, about twice the size of his thumbnail. He tucked it back between the pages.

Hurried footsteps pattered up the stairs outside. Callen swiftly snapped the journal shut and stuffed it up his jumper.

Mum's face appeared round the door. "There you are! I wondered where you'd been hiding." To his surprise, she didn't sound annoyed.

Mum glanced around the bedroom and a strange expression flitted across her face.

"Come on, I'll show you your room, shall I?" she said. She

closed the door behind Callen as he came out and he heard the key turn in the lock.

More secrets.

“Why did you lock the door?”

“We’re not using that room just yet and Dad doesn’t want it disturbed.”

“Why not?”

“Grief is a funny thing. He just needs some time.”

“Whose room was it? It’s not Nan’s.”

Mum was already heading up the stairs, away from his questions. “This way. You’re up on the top floor. Best views in the house.”

Callen sighed and trotted after her.



As soon as he walked into his new bedroom, Callen could see that Mum had tried to make it look like his old one. His bed was made up with his Star Wars duvet set and his posters were already tacked to the wall above the headboard. Other than that, everything was wrong. The ceilings sloped. The floor was wood, with a small mould-green rug in the middle. The whole room was covered in flowery wallpaper that seemed to crawl and move when he looked sideways at it.

There was no sign of his desk, and nowhere to fit it, even if they did manage to get it up here. A big heap of boxes labelled ‘Callen Bedroom’ were stacked ominously against the wall next to the door.

His bad mood returned full force.

“Where’s my desk?”

“Next floor down. You’ve got your own study – well, homework space – down there.”

She said it as though he should be happy about it. But the mention of homework was like a jab to the guts. Come September, all his friends would be starting secondary school without him. Presumably, he would too, but he had no idea where. The last hour of the journey had been nothing but winding country roads.

Mum gazed out of the window, oblivious. “Gosh, you can see all the way to the village from up here.”

Callen stomped over to the window and flinched. “What is that?!”

“One of the gargoyles,” said Mum with a smile.

Callen stared at the statue outside his window and curled his lip. It was crouched as though ready to launch itself from the ledge, its claws curled around the edge of the stone parapet. Its short stubby horns and eagle’s wings incongruous with the lion’s haunches and a narrow tail. “So, I’m meant to sleep with a monster outside my window?”

“Guarding your window!” Dad’s voice came from the doorway. “Gargoyles exist to protect us.”

Joining them at the window, Dad put an arm round Callen’s shoulders and sighed. “Feels odd to be back here, after all this time. Even stranger for you, no doubt. It’ll be better once we’ve settled in a bit and you’ve got the whole summer holiday for that. Mum and I are planning to start the unpacking tomorrow. Maybe you could get out and explore the grounds? That’d be fun, right?”

Callen felt his eyes prickle. He blinked hard and nodded reluctantly.

Maybe it would be fun. But he'd still rather be at home.

Their home. Not this broken-down old place, with its scary statues and nailed-up doors. He shrugged Dad's arm off his shoulder.

"Why didn't we ever come here before? When Nan was alive?"

"Callen . . ." said Mum.

Dad shook his head, looking very tired all of a sudden. "No, it's all right." He sat down on Callen's bed and patted the space next to him. Callen sat down. He plucked uncomfortably at the duvet, aware that he'd maybe overstepped the mark.

Dad hadn't exactly been upset when he got the news about Nan passing, but he'd been really quiet for a while. He stopped going to work and shut himself away in his study for what felt like weeks. When he finally surfaced, he was different. They were moving house. Their house was being sold. Everything was already decided, with no discussion and no warning.

"Your Nan and I had a falling out, years ago," said Dad. "She had very set ideas about things. I decided I needed to find my own path. That's how I ended up married to your mum and working for the museum. But when your Nan passed away, I realised I needed to make some changes."

"Dad, are you having a midlife crisis?"

Mum guffawed with laughter and then clapped a hand over her mouth. "Where did you even hear that phrase?"

"From Gav. Pete's dad had one. He bought a flashy car, then he and Pete's mum got a divorce. He lost *his* job, too."

Dad chuckled. “I haven’t lost my job. I’m on a sabbatical. And Mum and I are not getting divorced. We’ve just moved house, that’s all. It’s not the end of the world.”

It just feels like it, Callen thought.



3

Midnight

After a day of massive changes and heaving boxes around the place, what Callen really wanted was to curl up under his duvet with a heap of his favourite graphic novels. But neither Mum nor Dad were sure which box they'd been packed in.

Callen eyed the pile of boxes. They'd better be in there somewhere. They were precious. But he couldn't face hunting for them, right now.

Instead, he slid the journal out from under his pillow and opened it to the first page. Dense lines of teeny tiny handwriting. It was going to be hard to decipher.

He flicked forwards to the first gargyle sketch and glanced at his window. Mum had shut the curtains, but he

remembered what it looked like: stubby horns, wings, a lion's tail. This drawing wasn't his gargoyle.

Over supper, Dad had explained that the gargoyles were all unique; not one of them the same. If he could track down the gargoyle in the sketch, perhaps he'd learn something about who'd written the journal. He'd look for it tomorrow, he decided. He'd had enough mysteries for one day.

Callen slipped the journal under his pillow. A secret of his own.

He snuggled down under the duvet and closed his eyes. He rolled over to face the wall and huffed, then rolled back again. He couldn't get comfy. The room felt unfamiliar. It smelt different – maybe that was it – a mixture of dust and a faintly animal muskiness.

And his head was full of monsters. He kept thinking about the gargoyle in the sketchbook, and the one out there on his window ledge. Even with the curtains drawn, he could still feel it out there, lurking.

Maybe Mum and Dad would let him move down to one of the bedrooms on the first floor? One without a gargoyle outside. There were loads of rooms. It shouldn't be a problem. *I'll ask in the morning*, he decided.

Pleased that he'd got a plan, Callen snuggled lower and pulled his duvet up high round his neck.

One night. He could do one night.



Callen wasn't sure what had woken him, but now he was wide

awake, his heart racing. An owl hooted outside and he let out a shaky breath.

The sound of claws skittered up the ceiling above his head and now he was bolt upright, ears straining. Was the sound coming from the roof, or inside the wall? He wasn't sure.

Callen sat very still, staring at the spot where the noise had stopped. A rat? Rats could climb inside walls. Especially in old buildings. Or maybe it was a squirrel, outside on the roof? That would be better. At least then it would be outside.

He glanced at his radio alarm clock, glowing red beside the bed. 12:00. Midnight.

"It's just a squirrel," he said, out loud.

The sound of his own voice gave him courage. It sounded believable. He swung his legs out of bed and headed over to the window, opening the curtains.

If he leant out, he'd probably be able to see it. And then, he could go back to sleep.

Callen unlatched the window and leant over the sill, craning around to look at the slopes of the roof on either side.

No squirrels. Not that he could see.

His heart froze.

No gargoyle, either.

It should be there. Right there. On the ledge in front of his window. Callen turned back slowly, his gaze settling on the empty pedestal. He could see the cleaner patch of stone where the gargoyle should be sitting, pale in the moonlight.

He looked along the parapet. All the other gargoyles were still there, staring stonily out into the night.

So where was his gargoyle?

There was a sudden gust of air as something large landed on the roof above him.

Callen dived for the floor and wedged himself under the bed, wriggling out of sight, just in time. There was a scuffling sound and a creak as the window swung wider, then a thud as something jumped inside and landed on the ugly green rug.

He could see two huge scaled feet, not a metre from his nose. Each toe ended in a claw – wickedly sharp, glinting blue in the moonlight.

The creature took a step towards him and Callen shrank back. As it moved off the rug, its long claws raked the wooden floor. Callen scrunched his eyes shut and wished himself invisible.

Don't see me. Don't see me. Don't see me.

The click of claws on wood moved away towards the door, before circling back towards him. Callen could hear the creature breathing – short huffs, as though it were smelling the air. He held his breath, hoping the smell of toothpaste wouldn't give him away.

His duvet tumbled off the bed, then his pillows.

The creature bent its head to nose at something on the floor. Its face was wide and scaly, and silvery scars criss-crossed its long neck. Recognition flared in Callen's chest.

The gargoyle from the sketch!

The gargoyle pushed one of the pillows aside, revealing a rectangular leather cover, splayed open on the floor.

The journal . . .

For a split second, Callen had the urge to reach out and snatch

it away. But it was too late. The gargoyle's long claws closed in a pincer motion and plucked something from the journal with a soft tearing sound.

Then the creature turned and looked directly at him.

Its lips peeled back in a snarl, revealing razor-sharp teeth. Callen whimpered and pressed himself further under the bed.

"Thief."

Callen gaped, too shocked by the fact that the gargoyle could speak to think of an answer.

The pages of the journal fluttered in the cold breeze from the window, but the gargoyle's eyes remained fixed on Callen. "This is NOT YOURS!" Its voice was low and gravelly, its tone harsh.

Callen opened his mouth, but only a squeak came out.

The gargoyle let out a huff, its breath loud in the darkness, then bounded across the floor and launched itself out of the window. Callen lay frozen, his heart pounding, but it didn't come back.

It's alive.

It's alive and it was in my room.

Callen wriggled awkwardly out of his hiding place, sprang to his feet and slammed the window shut. He closed the curtains so hard that two hooks popped out of the runner.

As he turned, he saw the journal, lying open on the floor.

His heart began to slow as his curiosity woke up. What did it want with the journal? What had it taken?

He crouched and picked it up. Nothing fell out.

Callen hurriedly ran his hands across his bed sheet, then picked up his pillows and shook them. He tossed them onto the bed in frustration.

The scale was gone.

A *gargoyle scale*, he realised now.

He'd had one. And now he'd lost it.