TAMSIN MORI



Gargoules

THE WATCHER







Illustrated by David Dean

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For Cath & Catherine
May we lift each other's dreams ever higher





1
Crossed Swords

Mum looked up as Callen opened the kitchen door. "Good timing! I was just going to give you a shout. You hungry for breakfast?"

"Ravenous," said Callen. He pulled out a chair and sat down.

"So? What's the plan today?" Mum said. "More training with Zariel?"

Callen nodded. "Just this morning, though. This afternoon I'm going on a bike ride with Yas."

"That sounds fun." She handed him a plate of buttered toast and scrambled eggs.

"Thanks, Mum." Callen smothered the food in ketchup and began wolfing it down. Callen loved Guardian training,

but it left him perpetually hungry. *It's probably more exercise than I've ever done in my life,* he reflected. Learning how to ride a gargoyle was a lot more taxing than a kickabout in the park.

"Don't forget to chew," chided Mum gently.

"Love? I've got news." Dad came striding into the kitchen but pulled up short when he saw Callen. "Oh, good morning! Didn't realise you were up already." He stuffed the envelope he was holding into his pocket and picked up the ketchup bottle. "Good grief! I should buy shares in this stuff. You know it's meant to be a condiment, right?"

It was classic Dad: obfuscation, accusation, distraction. Callen had thought they were past all that. He swallowed his mouthful. "News about what?"

"Nothing. I need to chat to your mum about something. That's all."

Callen sat very still. "No more secrets, Dad. You promised."

Mum turned around, wiping her hands on a tea towel. "You did," she agreed.

Dad sat down at the table and sucked his teeth, buying time. He pulled the envelope out of his pocket and turned it over in his hands. "You remember I wrote to Oculus?"

Callen frowned. "The ones who helped Nan seal the Source?"

"The organisation who oversee all the magical Sources," amended Dad.

Callen pursed his lips and nodded.

"Well, they've written back. They're coming for a visit."

Callen got to his feet. "Wait a minute, Zariel should hear this." He opened the back door and yelled, "ZARIEL!"

The winged lioness swept down from above and landed beside him, muscles bunched, poised to defend him. "Did you see a ghast?"

"No. Sorry. Nothing like that. Oculus wrote back to Dad." He beckoned her inside. The velvety skin between the gargoyle's horns creased in a frown, and she followed him into the kitchen.

"When are they arriving?" asked Mum.

Dad flapped the letter and shrugged. "It doesn't specify – it just says they'll send a Watcher as soon as one becomes available."

"A Watcher!" Zariel let out a low growl. "I do not understand why you would willingly invite this type of scrutiny."

"Because it's the right thing to do!" said Dad, bristling at Zariel's tone. "My mother had to get their approval to seal the Source. There were letters about it amongst her correspondence. It's only right they should know that the magic is at full flow again. I thought perhaps they might be able to give us some advice – a bit of support."

Zariel grunted. "Have you ever *met* a Watcher?"

Dad shook his head. "No. I've never actually met one. Mum sent me away to stay with friends when all that was going on."

"Watchers are closer to military tacticians than teachers. I very much doubt they will be coming here to offer *advice*." Zariel lowered her head, closed her eyes and sighed.

"What does the letter say?" demanded Callen. "Why *are* they coming here?"

Dad sighed. "To check the magic isn't tainted any more."

"It's not!" stated Callen. "You know it's not. We purified it. Did you tell them that?"

"Yes! Of course I did."

Callen gritted his teeth. Oculus had better not think they could come here and reseal the Source. All the magic in this place – the gargoyles, the kelpies, the fairies, the forest imp – depended on the Source being open. He wasn't going to let outsiders come and take that away. Not when they'd fought so hard to protect it.

"That's not all." Dad licked his lips uncomfortably and glanced down at his hands. "They're going to assess you, too," he said. "To determine whether you're ready to be sole Guardian of this place."

Callen swallowed and looked at Zariel. Her tailed switched from side to side. He couldn't tell whether she was anxious or angry – it could be either. "Zariel thinks I'm ready," he prompted. "Don't you, Zariel?"

The gargoyle was silent. *Please, please say yes.*

"I do," she said at last, then puffed. "Whether the Watcher will agree, is another matter entirely."

"How do we convince them?" asked Callen.

"We complete your training as best we can before they arrive." Zariel raised her head and fixed Dad with a golden-eyed stare. "You promised to teach Callen sword skills. That has not happened."

Dad glanced at Mum. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "I'm quite busy with the renovation works at the moment, but I expect we can fit in an hour here or there."

"It is the one skill I cannot teach him," said Zariel.

"No. Of course not," said Dad. "For that you'd need opposable thumbs." He stuck his thumbs up and wiggled them in an awkward attempt at humour. Zariel stared at Dad until his cheeks flushed.

He folded his hands and nodded. "I mean . . . Yes. Sure. We can do that."

"Now?" checked Callen.

"The sooner the better," agreed Zariel.



Three hours later, Callen's energy was beginning to flag. Dad had decided the best place to practise was on the wide slope of the back lawn, beyond the patio. When they'd started, they'd been in the looming shadow of the house, but now the sun had climbed higher, and Callen was sticky and uncomfortable.

He squinted up at the roofline of the mansion, acutely aware that the gargoyles were probably watching. Zariel might have agreed to make him a Guardian, but not all the gargoyles were convinced she'd made the right choice – especially not the scaly one, coiled around the drainpipe. It stared down at him stonily, looking deeply unimpressed.

Callen rubbed his aching shoulder and raised his sword again. He might have made a mistake in choosing the rapier, the largest sword in the rack. It looked cool, but it was too heavy. Not that he was about to admit that to Dad, of course.

"Again! Step and lunge," instructed Dad. "Stop! Wrong foot again."

Callen groaned in frustration. "Ghasts aren't going to care about my footwork!"

"No, but *you* should. It affects your balance." Dad pushed his shoulder, making Callen stumble sideways.