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UNTAMED DARKNESS

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Whispers

Callen's senses were on full alert as he and his friends strode along the lane towards the village. He was keeping a particularly close eye on the towering hedges on either side of the lane. So far, they were uniformly green, the grassy banks beneath them bright with wildflowers. Nothing out here hinted at dark magic.

"You sure about this?" he said, after a while. "I don't see any of the warning signs. What did Morgana actually say when she called?"

"I told you," said Yasmin. "She said there were ghasts in the village and that you're the Guardian now, so it's your job to sort it out."

Callen frowned briefly. "You know it's not, right? I'm

Guardian of Gargoyle's Rest, not Guardian of everywhere. This *isn't* my job."

Yasmin shrugged. "I still think we should help. The Watcher wanted to ignore everything outside the walls, and we all agreed that felt wrong. You said we're going to do things differently now you're Guardian."

She had a point. But Callen was keen to avoid taking on any problems that weren't his. Looking after Gargoyle's Rest already felt like a heavy responsibility.

"We will. But if there *are* ghasts in the village, the village gargoyles should be dealing with them."

"Look, we owe Morgana," said Yasmin. "She saved our necks before. And now she's asking for help. The least we can do is check it out." She glanced at Angus for support.

Angus nodded. "It's not like her to stress out."

"Well, I still think she's probably overreacting," said Callen. "Oculus said everything was sorted."

"Oculus have been wrong before," said Angus.

Callen rolled his eyes. "Do you honestly think they would have left me in charge if they thought the darkness would come back?"

"Probably not," conceded Angus. "But hey, you're the one who wanted to be sole Guardian, and now you are. So, suck it up. Let's go do Guardian stuff."

Over the past few days, Angus had been a bit off with Callen – there was an edge to his banter. Somehow, the fact that Oculus had declared Callen 'sole Guardian' had rubbed Angus the wrong way.

"You make a good point though," Angus continued. "With enough gargoyles, you don't really need a Guardian at all."

"Don't be silly," said Yasmin. "Of course you need a Guardian. They're in charge of everything."

Angus snorted. "He's not in charge of me."

"I never said I was, Angus!" protested Callen.

"Well, I think Callen's a *great* Guardian," piped up Raf.

Callen smiled briefly. "Thanks, Raf."

"He's only saying that because you let him come with us," said Angus.

"No! I'm saying it coz it's true!" said Raf. "Callen found out who was making ghasts. And he fought a grotesque. And he rescued your kelpie—"

"*We* rescued my kelpie," interrupted Angus. "*We* did. It wasn't just Callen."

"And he did special training. And he's got a gargoyle," continued Raf.

"Fine! We get it. He's very *special*!" snapped Angus.

Callen patted Raf's shoulder to shut him up. He was grateful to Raf and Yasmin for sticking up for him, but it wasn't helping Angus's mood.

"To be fair, I don't think I could have done any of those things without you guys," he admitted. "Oculus should have named us co-Guardians or something."

"Too right," muttered Angus.

"If we're all Guardians, does that mean I get a gargoyle?" said Raf, skipping with excitement.

Callen shrugged. "Maybe . . . if you make friends with one. It's not up to me, is it?"

"Cool! I'm going to get my own gargoyle!" crowed Raf.

Yasmin was winding one of her curls around her finger, her gaze distant. "Did Oculus specifically say that you're only meant to look after Gargoyle's Rest?"

"What do you mean *only*?" said Callen. "That's enough, isn't it? I've got to maintain the boundary, keep training, tell the gargoyles what to do, send reports. Dad keeps nagging me about the reports. I haven't sent one yet, but—"

"Callen!" interrupted Yasmin. "Did Oculus tell you *not* to look after the village?

Callen shot her a glance. It wasn't like Yasmin to cut him off like that. "No. Not exactly. But they said I had to focus on protecting the major Source. They said the minor Sources wouldn't be a problem – they take care of themselves. Why?"

Yasmin shook her head. "Just something Morgana said."

"Do all Guardians have to write reports?" said Raf. "Only that sounds really boring."

"No. Only Guardians in charge of a major Source," clarified Callen.

"Oh, phew," said Raf. "Okay, I'm still getting a gargoyle, then."

"How often are you meant to write these reports?" asked Angus.

"Every day!" groaned Callen. "Seriously! I thought the hard work was over after the Guardianship tests were done, but apparently not. I'm like a magnet for homework."

"How are you going to keep that up when we start school?" said Angus.

"No!" wailed Raf. "Angus said the 'S' word! You can't use the 'S' word in the holidays. Tell him, Yas!"

Yasmin smiled. "You heard the boy. No talking about school until term starts."

"Sorry. My bad," said Angus. He mimed zipping his lips shut.

Callen kicked a pebble along the lane. He had no idea how he was going to fit being a Guardian around school. And Raf was right – he didn't want to be thinking about it right now, with only two weeks of the summer holidays left.

He sighed. "I tried telling Dad I needed to be home-schooled like he was, but he said no. Something about 'normal social development'. I think he's just keen to have me out of his hair. I'm sure he thinks the magic is my fault somehow – that maybe it'll go away when I'm not at home."

Yasmin chuckled. "Not likely."

They'd reached the edge of the village now and Callen was beginning to feel a bit more confident that the call from Morgana had been a false alarm, but as they reached the crossroads with the big council building, Raf tugged at his sleeve.

"What's up, Raf?"

Yasmin took one look at Raf's face and immediately crouched down beside him. "Do you hear something?"

Raf pointed towards the village green, wide-eyed. "Whispers."

They all knew what that meant: ghasts. Raf was the only one who could hear them – a side-effect of having been tainted. Morgana had said it would fade, in time. But right now, Callen was glad of the warning.

He gripped Nan's cane a little tighter, reassuring himself that the hidden blade was right there if needed. He hoped not – swinging a sword around in the high street would get him in massive trouble.

Yasmin stood up and put a protective hand on Raf's shoulder. "I was planning to go the bakery first, but perhaps we should head straight for Morgana's?"

"No! Doughnuts! You promised!" protested Raf, indignation swiftly replacing his fear.

Callen smiled. There couldn't be too many ghasts around if Raf was still prioritising doughnuts. He glanced at the queue outside the bakery. "Ghasts don't come out in plain view. The bakery's probably one of the safest places to be."

Raf nodded seriously. "See? It's for safety."

Yasmin rolled her eyes. "Fine. Safety doughnuts it is." She looked pointedly at Callen. "Are you okay to check out the 'whispers'?"

"Sure. I'll meet you at Morgana's."

Sole Guardian. I've got this. And it's probably a whole load of fuss about nothing.

All the same, he was glad that Angus made no move to follow the others. Instead, he nodded towards the village green. "Shall we?"

Callen nodded and fell into step beside him. Something crunched underfoot. Callen looked down with a frown. The pavement glittered with tiny cubes of glass. He scuffed them off the curb into the gutter. *You're overthinking it,* he reassured himself.

A little further along, a workman was hammering a large board into place over a broken shop window. Callen's optimism began to fade, replaced by a creeping sense of doubt. The lanes might be clear of ghasts, but here in the village, something felt off.

"Morgana was right," he muttered. "I can see all the signs."

"What do you mean?" said Angus. "What signs?"

Callen pointed impatiently along the street. "The grocery's

windows are boarded up. I bet that was ghasts. They like breaking stuff. There were square bits of glass on the pavement too – car window. Probably ghasts again. And I can smell them. It's really strong." He wrinkled his nose as the breeze wafted an acrid stench from the nearest alleyway.

Angus sniffed, then snorted in disgust. "Smells like bins."

Callen shook his head. "It's not. It's ghasts."

Angus frowned, annoyed at being contradicted. "Since when did you become a super-sleuth? Is it like some magic power you get when they make you Guardian?"

"I wish!" said Callen. "No. I got training, remember? Observation skills was one of the things the Watcher taught me."

"The Watcher . . ." Angus's eyes hardened, and Callen immediately regretted mentioning him. The Watcher had been ready to kill Angus's kelpie rather than try to cure him – Angus would never forgive that.

"Hey!" said Callen, holding his hands up. "He was wrong about a lot of things, but I did learn *some* useful stuff."

A muscle in Angus's jaw twitched as he bit his teeth together, then he took a breath and looked up and down the street. "Something definitely feels different," he conceded. "I'm not sure I would have been able to tell what."

Callen nodded, relieved that Angus was willing to let it go.

As they reached the end of the high street, Callen stopped. The village green was deserted. "There are usually masses of people here feeding the ducks. Where is everyone?"

"No idea. It's weird, though."

There was nothing much to see, besides some abandoned coffee

cups on the picnic tables. The green was never empty like this – especially not on a sunny day. Something must have happened to drive everyone away. The reeds on the far side of the brook rustled briefly and Callen gave an involuntary shiver.

Angus nudged Callen's arm. "Look," he said, pointing at the row of cottages near the brook. Two raven gargoyles, Heckle and Cawmack, were perched on the ridgeline of the roof, staring intently at something on the far side.

Callen's heart lifted. Gargoyles! They weren't on their own here after all.