

# THE GARDEN THAT GROWLED

*A Prequel to The Canticle Kingdom*



Michael D. Young

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Years before Johann ever discovered the hidden room behind his uncle's blacksmith shop, there came a morning when the western garden of the castle growled at Rufus.

This was not, in itself, enough to make him run. The castle possessed more than its fair share of peculiarities, and after several years in the Queen's service Rufus had learned that almost any strange occurrence could be explained by one of three things: old magic, bad plumbing, or Cornelius. The garden had whistled at him before, though the gardeners insisted that the wind was responsible, and during one particularly damp spring a bed of yellow tulips had sneezed whenever anyone walked past. Cornelius had blamed enchanted fertilizer. Rufus had blamed Cornelius, which was generally the safer conclusion.

The growl came again, low enough to tremble through the gravel beneath his shoes. One of the account books tucked beneath his arm slipped free and landed squarely on his foot, causing him to give a strangled cry around the narrow wooden case he had been carrying between his teeth. Muttering something that would have earned a servant a stern lecture, Rufus

set the rest of his burden on the path and stared toward a cluster of crimson roses trembling beside the hedge.

"Cornelius?" he called, waiting several seconds for the wizard to emerge with an apology, an explanation, or at the very least a fire extinguisher. When nothing answered him, Rufus removed the box from his mouth and took a cautious step forward, already irritated with himself for doing so. "Cornelius, if this is another experiment, I would like it understood that I have three reports to deliver before breakfast, a meeting with the Captain immediately afterward, and neither the time nor the temperament to be chased around the garden by anything with more teeth than I possess."

The hedge exploded.

Branches snapped and rose petals scattered over the path as a massive gray form burst through the leaves. Rufus threw up both arms and screamed, while another voice screamed at almost exactly the same pitch from the opposite side of the hedge. He managed six running strides before the second cry registered as decidedly human. Skidding across the gravel, he whirled around and found Cornelius flat on his back among the roses, his robe caught on several thorns and his pointed hat lying several feet away with all the dignity of an overturned soup bowl.

For several moments the two men merely stared at one another. Cornelius finally pushed himself onto his elbows, dislodging several leaves from his hair. "You screamed."

"So did you," Rufus replied, folding his arms and trying to recover what remained of his dignity. "The difference is that I was surprised by a monster. You appear to have been surprised by a rosebush."

Cornelius glanced down at his torn robe, then back at Rufus. "I was surprised by you, actually, which makes that comment seem needlessly personal."

"I did not mean you." Rufus's arms dropped at once when something large rustled on the other side of the hedge. His annoyance, which had been mounting quite comfortably, suddenly found itself competing with self-preservation. "What was that?"

Instead of looking alarmed, Cornelius brightened. "You heard it clearly, then? Excellent. The eyes worked yesterday, and I was fairly certain I had solved the problem with the joints, but the voice was proving troublesome."

Rufus crossed the path in two strides, seized the front of the wizard's robe, and hauled him halfway upright. "It nearly stopped my heart, Cornelius. I fail to see how that qualifies as excellent, and I would strongly recommend that you stop describing its working parts as though that makes the situation better."

"Come now, you really ought to see it." Cornelius freed himself and brushed dirt from his sleeves with the composure of a man discussing an unusually successful pudding. When Rufus took a deliberate step backward and refused, the wizard gave him the patient expression he reserved for people who had the impertinence to think that magic ought to behave sensibly. "Do you remember those sketches I borrowed from your room?"

Rufus's irritation cooled into suspicion. Several weeks earlier Cornelius had discovered the leather-bound sketchbook Rufus kept tucked beneath a stack of correspondence and had begged to borrow it. Drawing was not a habit Rufus advertised. A chamberlain was supposed to concern himself with schedules, ceremonies, visiting dignitaries, the royal kitchens, the guard rotation, and the thousand other details no one noticed until they went wrong. A chamberlain was

not supposed to spend his evenings drawing dragons, lions, horned beasts, and creatures that existed nowhere outside his imagination.

Unfortunately, Cornelius had discovered the drawings. Even more unfortunately, he had liked them.

Rufus turned slowly toward the ruined hedge. "You didn't."

"I did." Cornelius recovered his hat, jammed it crookedly onto his head, and when Rufus demanded to know exactly what he had done, the wizard swept one arm toward the roses with theatrical pride. "Behold."

At first there was nothing to behold except several badly damaged rosebushes. Then the leaves shivered, a branch bent downward, and an enormous stone head pushed slowly through the opening. The creature resembled a mountain cat, though one considerably larger than any mountain cat had a right to be. Every muscle had been carved into its shoulders and haunches, individual strands of fur lined its neck, and each paw was broad enough to serve as a dinner plate. Most disturbing of all were the eyes, which glowed with a pale blue light as the animal stepped fully onto the path.

Rufus stared at the cougar. The cougar stared back. When he moved one step to the left, its head followed him; when he moved right, the blue eyes tracked him just as closely. "It is looking at me," he said, lowering his voice as if the creature might consider ordinary conversation provocative.

"Of course it is. You drew it."

Rufus shot him an incredulous glance. "I also drew a troll with six warts and one eye. I sincerely hope it does not feel similarly attached."

The cougar padded toward him with a slow, heavy tread that made the nearby rose leaves quiver. Rufus retreated until his heel struck one of the fallen account books and nearly sent him backward. "Call it off, Cornelius."

"There is nothing to call off. It has not attacked you." Cornelius watched the animal with growing fascination. "In fact, I think it likes you."

"I have never required the affection of a boulder."

The creature stopped directly before him and lowered its massive head until its stone nose touched the back of his hand. Rufus expected cold rock, but a strange warmth seeped into his skin, soft as sunlight through a window. Cautiously, and against every sensible instinct he possessed, he ran his fingers across the cougar's forehead. The animal closed its luminous eyes and produced a rumbling sound like two millstones grinding together beneath the earth.

Rufus snatched his hand away. "It growls."

"It purrs," Cornelius corrected, studying the animal with professional interest.

"Admittedly, the distinction is still somewhat academic."

The cougar nudged Rufus again, and this time he did not move away quite so quickly. He ran his eyes from the carved whiskers to the heavy paws, marveling despite himself at the way the thing seemed to breathe without breathing. "You really made this from my drawing?"

Cornelius nodded, obviously pleased that the terror had finally given way to curiosity. "I told you I wanted the sketches as models for the new garden statues."

"You neglected to mention that your statues would develop opinions."

"That would have spoiled the surprise."

A gardener appeared at the far end of the path carrying a watering can. The cougar turned its head and gave what Cornelius probably considered an inquisitive growl. The gardener

dropped the can and vanished behind the hedge without bothering to retrieve it, leaving a thin stream of water to darken the gravel.

Rufus watched him go, then fixed the wizard with a level stare. "Whatever admirable progress you have made in giving rock a personality, I think the experiment has reached a natural conclusion. Turn it back into a proper statue."

Cornelius hesitated just long enough to be noticed, and Rufus's eyes narrowed. When he asked whether the wizard could actually turn it back, Cornelius assured him that he certainly could. The cougar took another deliberate step toward them, blue eyes glowing innocently.

"Probably," Cornelius added.

Rufus closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead, wondering whether the Queen would accept insanity as a legitimate reason for resigning from the royal household. "By the Queen."

#



Cornelius explained the plan over breakfast, which did very little to improve Rufus's opinion of it. During his years at the castle he had learned that the wizard's most dangerous sentences often began with assurances that something was simple, perfectly safe, or almost certainly reversible. This morning Cornelius chose the first.

"It is really quite simple," he said, tearing a piece of bread in half. "Her Majesty commissioned a new collection of statues for the western garden before the summer festival. Ordinary statues would have satisfied the request, of course, but ordinary statues possess a number of obvious limitations."

Rufus poured himself tea and did not bother looking up. "They stand still, which is generally considered a desirable quality in stone."

"Exactly, and therein lies the problem." Cornelius leaned forward, warming to his subject. "They stand, they collect moss, birds insult them, and after a few generations no one remembers what half of them represent. It seems a dreadful waste of perfectly good craftsmanship. I merely thought the garden might be more useful if its guardians could actually guard something. Imagine an invading army storming the grounds, expecting nothing but shrubbery, and discovering that the shrubbery has teeth."

Rufus buttered a piece of bread with exaggerated care. "I can think of several reasons why a sensible invading army would choose the front gate before attempting to conquer us through the roses, but I suspect practicality stopped being part of this conversation before I arrived."

"Not with that attitude," Cornelius said, apparently satisfied that he had won the point.

The cougar sat beside Rufus's chair as though it had been invited to breakfast. It had followed them into the castle, frightening two servants, an under-cook, and a page who had

attempted to escape by climbing a tapestry. The animal ignored everyone except Rufus, whom it regarded with the patient devotion of an oversized dog. Presently it rested its enormous chin on his shoulder, forcing him to lean sideways beneath the weight.

Rufus shoved it away and straightened his collar. "If it insists on behaving like this, perhaps you can at least give it a less inconvenient way of expressing affection."

"I suppose I could make it smaller," Cornelius mused.

At once the cougar's ears flattened, and the wizard slowly lowered his cup. "Interesting. I think it understood me."

Rufus set down the teapot with great care and stared across the table. "You have made a half-ton rock cat that understands conversation?"

"Apparently. That was not one of the intended features, but I hesitate to complain about successful magic."

Before Rufus could answer, the cougar leaned over and dragged its stone tongue across his cheek. The sensation was rather like being licked by a paving stone, and he shot upright so quickly that his chair nearly overturned. Cornelius doubled over in laughter while Rufus wiped his face with a napkin and informed the wizard, in a tone normally reserved for delinquent servants, that he was pleased his suffering continued to provide such nourishment to the man's spirit.

"It does," Cornelius admitted, making no effort to hide it.

The dining-room doors opened before Rufus could formulate a suitable reply. The Queen entered with Camilla, her calico cat, trotting at her heels. Rufus straightened immediately; Cornelius did likewise, though he had to wipe crumbs from the front of his robe. Camilla came

three steps into the room before noticing the stone cougar, at which point she stopped so abruptly that her hindquarters nearly overtook the rest of her.

The cougar noticed Camilla at precisely the same moment. Silence settled over the chamber with the suddenness of a dropped curtain. Camilla arched her back until she seemed twice her normal size, while the cougar lowered its massive head, blue eyes fixed on the much smaller animal. Rufus whispered Cornelius's name without moving his lips. Cornelius, equally motionless, assured him that he had already noticed the problem.

"Do something," Rufus muttered.

"I am thinking."

"I recommend greater speed."

The Queen glanced from one man to the other and then toward the enormous stone animal beside the breakfast table. "Would either of you care to explain why there is a mountain cat in my dining room?"

"Nothing," Rufus and Cornelius answered together, which even Rufus recognized as a particularly poor response.

Camilla hissed. The cougar answered with a roar that rattled every cup and plate on the table, and breakfast immediately ceased to be a meal and became an event. Camilla shot beneath a chair, the cougar leapt over the table after her, and one stone paw caught the edge of the cloth with enough force to drag half the breakfast into the air. Cornelius lunged for Camilla, Rufus lunged for the cougar, and the Queen jumped aside as plates, bread, jam, cheese, and one extremely unfortunate sausage sailed through the chamber.

The table collapsed beneath Cornelius, who disappeared under the cloth with a cry that Rufus privately thought sounded very much like his scream in the garden. Camilla escaped

through the open door and the cougar thundered after her. For several seconds Rufus stood amid the wreckage, speechless, while Cornelius's head emerged cautiously from beneath the tablecloth.

The Queen looked down at the jam on her sleeve, then at Rufus. She pointed toward the door with a calmness far more terrifying than anger. "Get my cat."

Rufus bowed hastily. "Yes, Majesty."

"And Rufus?" He paused in the doorway and looked back. The Queen dabbed one finger against the jam on her sleeve. "Find somewhere else to eat breakfast tomorrow."

Rufus bowed again and fled before she thought of anything more.

Camilla led them through half the castle. She streaked down corridors, under benches, through a linen closet, across the chapel, and directly through a group of visiting dignitaries who had been unfortunate enough to choose that moment for a guided tour. The cougar followed. Rufus followed the cougar. Cornelius followed Rufus. Three guards followed Cornelius, two servants followed the guards, and no one could later explain why a cook joined the procession carrying a frying pan.

"Stop!" Rufus shouted as they rounded another corner, but the cougar showed no sign that it had even heard him. "Why is it not listening? I have been commanding it since we left the dining room."

Cornelius puffed beside him, clutching his hat with one hand. "Those were complaints. Magically speaking, there is a difference."

"If we survive this, you will explain that difference while scrubbing jam from the Queen's carpet."

Camilla vanished up a narrow stairway that led toward the upper service rooms. By the time Rufus reached the top, she had slipped through an open window and was racing across the sloping roof beyond. The cougar sprang after her before anyone could stop it, landing hard enough to send several roof tiles skittering into the courtyard.

Rufus halted at the sill and stared down at the tiled rooftops. "No. Absolutely not."

A crash sounded from below, followed by several shrieks and the unmistakable ripping of fabric. Cornelius leaned out beside him, squinted into the courtyard, and uttered a thoughtful, "Well."

Rufus closed his eyes. "Was that the armory?"

"I believe it was the laundry."

He opened his eyes again. "And this is better?"

"Marginally."

They ran.

#



By the time Rufus reached the lower courtyard, the situation had deteriorated into a scene he knew would be discussed by the servants for years. Three clotheslines had fallen, a hundred freshly washed garments littered the stones, and one pair of royal undergarments hung from the raised sword of a long-dead king. The stone cougar stood in the center of the destruction, staring upward. Camilla had climbed a tree and clung to one of the higher branches with every claw she possessed.

Rufus marched toward the beast before Cornelius could offer another theory. "Enough. I do not know what magical foolishness Cornelius put into that head of yours, but you are going back to the western garden. You are going to sit where you were placed, you are going to stop terrorizing servants, and you are going to leave Camilla alone."

The cougar looked at him for several seconds, then slowly lowered its head. The blue light in its eyes dimmed until only the ordinary gray of stone remained. Rufus, hardly daring to trust the sudden quiet, pointed toward the western garden. "Go."

The creature became perfectly still.

For several moments no one moved. The guards behind Rufus slowed to a cautious halt, the cook lowered his frying pan, and Cornelius stepped around the scattered laundry with an expression of delighted astonishment. "Remarkable."

Rufus turned on him. "Please tell me that word means you know what happened."

"Not entirely, but you did give it a true command." Cornelius circled the statue, examining the paws and eyes as if he expected an explanation to be carved somewhere beneath them. "Before this you were frightened, embarrassed, furious, and concerned primarily with whether the Queen intended to have you executed before or after breakfast. Just now you were protecting something."

Camilla gave a pitiful meow from the branches above, and Rufus glanced up. "I was protecting her?"

"Perhaps her, perhaps the servants, perhaps the castle. Magic is annoyingly imprecise about motives, but I think the spell responded to what you meant rather than what you said." Cornelius tapped one finger thoughtfully against his chin. "Intent may be the binding force. I had hoped it would be obedience, because obedience is much easier to document."

Rufus considered the stone creature with a growing uneasiness. "Then make certain the rest of them are not brought to life until you understand exactly what that means."

Cornelius started to reply, but Camilla meowed again, louder this time. Rufus pointed upward and told him to get her down. When the wizard protested that Rufus had drawn the cougar in the first place, Rufus reminded him that he had enchanted it. Cornelius, refusing to surrender, pointed out that Rufus had also made it enormous.

Rufus stiffened. "I did no such thing."

Cornelius raised one eyebrow and asked how large the animal had been when Rufus used it as a model. Rufus was forced to admit that there had been no model at all; he had simply wanted the beast to look impressive. The wizard's mouth curled upward in the maddening smile of a man who had just discovered evidence for an argument he had not known he was making.

"And people say artists contribute nothing useful to society."

Rufus glared at him until the smile weakened. "Get the cat."

Camilla refused to come down for Cornelius. She refused to come down for the guards, the servants, and the Queen's personal maid, who eventually arrived after hearing that a substantial portion of the royal laundry had migrated into the courtyard. She finally descended

when the cook held up a piece of sausage, proving once again that there were some problems magic was poorly suited to solve.

Rufus expected the statue project to end there. At the very least he expected the Queen to order the cougar reduced to gravel and Cornelius reassigned to something harmless, preferably very far from living things. He underestimated the Queen.

She arrived in the western garden that afternoon with Camilla tucked securely beneath one arm. The stone cougar had been returned to its original place among the roses and remained motionless, though Rufus did not trust it enough to stand within licking distance. Cornelius waited beside him with the air of a schoolboy summoned before a headmaster, which Rufus considered appropriate.

The Queen walked slowly around the statue, studying the carved muscles and the delicate lines around its face. "This is Rufus's work?"

"The design is," Cornelius replied, and Rufus quickly added that the chasing had been entirely the wizard's contribution.

The Queen's mouth twitched. She ran one hand along the cougar's shoulder, then stepped back far enough to take in the whole creature. "I think it is marvelous."

Rufus stared at her. "Majesty?"

"Not the chasing," she clarified, and Camilla gave an offended sound from her arms as though she wished the distinction entered formally into the record. "That portion could be improved. But look at it. The castle is full of statues that remind us of people who are dead - kings, knights, saints, men who won battles no one can clearly remember. Sometimes I think every corridor is trying to convince me that all the important things happened before I was born. This is different."

For once Cornelius said nothing. Rufus looked again at the cougar and tried to see it as the Queen did: not as a catastrophe waiting for sufficient momentum, but as something new in a castle that often seemed burdened by its own age.

The Queen shifted Camilla to her other arm. "It makes the garden feel alive. Can you make more?"

Cornelius's smile broadened before Rufus could answer, and he assured her that he could. The Queen appeared to enjoy Rufus's growing distress and repeated the command. Cornelius bowed with a flourish, looking every bit as pleased as Rufus felt doomed.

After she had gone, Rufus turned slowly toward the wizard. "No."

"A garden of enchanted beasts," Cornelius said, already speaking as though the matter had been settled by prophecy. "A stone menagerie. Lions, wolves, serpents, perhaps a gryphon if you can draw one convincingly."

"No gryphons."

"A gargoyle?"

"Absolutely not."

Cornelius folded his arms. "You heard the Queen."

Rufus groaned, already knowing the argument was lost. "One gargoyle. A small one. And if it licks me, I am holding you personally responsible."

#



For the next several weeks, Rufus drew. He drew in his chambers late at night after the last reports had been copied, in the council room while waiting for meetings to begin, and occasionally beneath a tree in the western garden while Cornelius worked nearby. Once he tried to sketch during supper and dipped his quill into a bowl of soup instead of the inkpot, after which he decided that art and meals were best kept separate. Cornelius carried each finished design away with the excitement of a child stealing pastries from a cooling rack and returned several days later asking for another.

The creatures multiplied across the western garden. Rufus drew lions with broad chests and sweeping manes, wolves whose heads seemed raised to catch a distant scent, serpents coiled around weathered pillars, enormous birds, horned beasts, and several animals so fanciful that even he could not decide what they were meant to be. Cornelius transformed them into stone with an enthusiasm that exhausted everyone who had to work around him, and before long the once-quiet garden began to look like a gathering place for every legend the kingdom had ever forgotten.

Their arguments became nearly as regular as the castle bells. One afternoon Cornelius studied a fresh drawing over Rufus's shoulder and objected that the creature possessed six legs, to which Rufus replied that he was already aware of this feature. Cornelius pointed out that nothing of that size had six legs; Rufus countered with insects; Cornelius observed that insects were not commonly the size of horses. By the end of the discussion, neither man had changed his mind, but the creature still had six legs.

"You asked for something no one had seen before," Rufus reminded him, taking back the page.

Cornelius nodded solemnly. "I was merely determining whether you had done it intentionally."

"You have known me long enough to assume that any artistic defect is deliberate."

"An excellent philosophy. I intend to apply it to magic."

The gargoyle produced an even longer dispute. Rufus had drawn the creature as a joke, giving it oversized ears, crooked teeth, and a squat body perched on ridiculously small feet. Cornelius declared it charming. Rufus declared it diseased. They eventually compromised on placing it above a side gate where, according to Cornelius, it could frighten assassins and, according to Rufus, would at least be difficult to see after dark.

As the garden filled, Cornelius's enchantments improved. He learned to bind each creature to a particular region so that none could wander through the castle without permission, and Rufus discovered that his commands worked best when they were simple and given with a clear purpose. The creatures could move, watch, and respond, but the magic remained strangely selective. A command given to impress someone rarely worked. A command given in anger worked badly. When Rufus told a stone wolf to move because it was blocking a gardener carrying a heavy basket, however, the creature stepped aside at once and then returned neatly to its former position.

"Intent," Cornelius said, pleased with himself. "I told you."

Rufus shook his head. "You guessed."

"All great magical discoveries begin as guesses."

"So do most disasters."

The Queen took enormous pleasure in the menagerie. Children visiting the castle squealed when a stone bird turned its head to follow them, elderly visitors jumped when the

gargoyle winked from above the gate, and several soldiers began wagering on whether the lion would roar when particular officers passed. Camilla never forgave the cougar. Whenever the Queen carried her into the western garden, the little cat kept one suspicious eye on the enormous stone beast and refused to touch the ground until they were safely beyond it.

For a time, the garden became the happiest place in the castle, and Rufus found himself spending more time there than he intended. He told himself that he was supervising Cornelius, which had the advantage of sounding official. In truth he liked watching people discover the creatures. The castle could be a solemn place, full of old portraits, older traditions, and corridors where servants lowered their voices without knowing why. The western garden did not lower its voice for anyone.

One evening Rufus sat beneath a tree with the sketchbook open across his knees while Cornelius worked nearby on an enormous serpent. The sun had dropped low enough to paint the castle walls gold, and far below them the town was settling toward evening. Market stalls closed one after another, thin columns of smoke rose from the chimneys, and the first lamps appeared along the streets. A warm breeze carried the smell of cut grass and roses across the garden, stirring the leaves just enough to make the stone creatures seem as if they were breathing.

The tower bells began to ring. A low tone sounded first, followed by a higher one and then the familiar descending scale that marked the hour. Rufus barely noticed until the cougar raised its head.

His hand stopped over the page.

Across the garden the lion opened its eyes. A wolf shifted on its pedestal. The gargoyle above the gate straightened, losing for a moment the ridiculous slump Cornelius had insisted upon. Even the unfinished serpent beneath the wizard's hands seemed to tighten its coils.

"Cornelius," Rufus said quietly.

The wizard was already staring. The creatures did not run, roar, or turn toward Rufus for instruction. They simply faced the tower and listened. The strange stillness lasted until the final note faded over the valley, at which point the blue light vanished from their eyes and every creature became ordinary stone again.

For several seconds neither man spoke. Rufus finally closed his sketchbook. "What did the bells do?"

Cornelius shook his head slowly. "I do not think it was the bells."

"What, then?"

"The music."

Rufus looked toward the distant tower. "There is a difference?"

A faint smile crossed the wizard's face, but it did not reach his eyes. "In this kingdom? There is always a difference."

Cornelius returned to the serpent and pretended to be occupied with one of the scales. Rufus did not return to his drawing. Something about the moment had unsettled him, though he could not have explained why. He leafed back through the sketchbook instead, passing the cougar, lion, gargoyle, serpent, wolf, and dozens of unfinished ideas.

He had never given much thought to where the drawings came from. Sometimes a shape in a cloud suggested a wing. Sometimes the shadow of a tree looked enough like a face that he could not rest until he had captured it. At other times his hand seemed to know what it wanted to draw before his mind had caught up with it, which he had always attributed to practice rather than anything mysterious.

When he reached the final page, he stopped.

A drawing occupied the parchment that he had never seen before. A tall, crooked figure stood beneath a dark archway, its face concealed in shadow and its long hands extending from narrow sleeves. Behind it, black lines twisted together like smoke or like music written by someone who had forgotten what music was supposed to sound like. Rufus knew every mark in the sketchbook; he could remember the evening, mood, or foolish impulse that had produced nearly all of them. This one belonged to none of those memories.

"Cornelius," he called, and something in his voice brought the wizard over without a joke.

Cornelius took the book. He studied the page for only a few seconds before the usual good humor drained from his face. When Rufus asked whether he had drawn it, the wizard shook his head. Rufus quietly admitted that he had not, either.

For several moments Cornelius continued to stare at the figure while the light faded around them. Rufus waited for an explanation, or at the very least one of the wizard's irritatingly cheerful theories, but none came. At last Cornelius tore the page from the book, folded it twice, and snapped his fingers. A thin blue flame raced across the parchment until nothing remained but a few curling pieces of ash.

Rufus stared at him. "What was that?"

"Nothing."

"That was very clearly not nothing."

Cornelius watched the last ember disappear between his fingers. "Then let us hope it becomes nothing."

The answer unsettled Rufus more than the drawing itself. Around them the garden was growing dark, and the stone teeth of the creatures no longer seemed quite as playful as they had

an hour before. Even the small gargoyle above the gate appeared to grin with unnecessary enthusiasm.

"Do not look at the garden as if it intends to eat you," Cornelius said, noticing his expression.

"You have just burned one of my drawings without explaining why. A drawing I do not remember making."

"Which I consider a very good reason to burn it."

Rufus studied him. "You recognized something."

Cornelius hesitated, then raised one finger before Rufus could press further. "Some mysteries improve when allowed to remain mysteries for a little while."

"That may be the least satisfying sentence you have ever spoken, which is an impressive accomplishment."

"Nevertheless." Cornelius returned to his work and began scraping carefully at one of the serpent's scales, though the movement lacked his usual enthusiasm.

Rufus remained beneath the tree a while longer. The bells had stopped, but he could not rid himself of the feeling that something in the kingdom was still listening.

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Three days later the Queen formally opened the garden, and by midmorning the castle grounds were crowded with townspeople. Ribbons stretched between the trees, musicians played near the fountains, and tables overflowed with pastries, fruit, sausages, and enough bread to sustain what Rufus privately estimated would have been a respectable siege. The new stone creatures stood among the visitors like silent guests, magnificent enough to attract attention even without moving.

Rufus stayed near the edge of the gathering until Cornelius seized him by the sleeve and pulled him toward the central fountain. When Rufus objected, the wizard explained that they were going to receive praise. Rufus pointed out that no one knew he had contributed anything, which Cornelius considered an intolerable arrangement and Rufus considered ideal.

The Queen approached the great cougar with Camilla held safely in her arms. At a touch to the creature's forehead, its eyes glowed blue and a murmur passed through the crowd. The cougar lowered itself until the Queen could rest one hand on its head. Camilla hissed from the safety of her arms, producing laughter from nearly everyone in the garden, including Rufus.

The Queen caught sight of him and beckoned him closer. "There you are. You did well."

Rufus bowed. "Cornelius did the difficult portion, Majesty."

The wizard made an offended sound, and Rufus amended the statement to the dangerous portion, which Cornelius found more acceptable.

The Queen shook her head and looked over the gathering. A little boy had placed one hand inside the open mouth of a stone lion while his horrified mother tried to pull him away; two elderly women were arguing over whether the six-legged beast beside the fountain was meant to be a bear; and several soldiers posed beneath a great bird while one of their companions attempted to sketch them. "You both did something important. They needed this."

Rufus followed her gaze. "Statues?"

"Something wonderful." Her voice softened, and for a moment she looked less like the ruler of a kingdom and more like someone who had simply grown tired of watching people be afraid. "There has been enough fear."

The words reminded Rufus of the burned drawing, but before the thought could darken the moment, a little girl slipped free of her mother's hand and ran directly toward the cougar. The child could not have been more than five. She wrapped both arms around one of its massive stone legs, and the creature slowly lowered its head until she could reach its nose. When she kissed the end of it, the crowd laughed and applauded.

Cornelius nudged Rufus with one elbow. "Still think drawing monsters is a waste of time?"

"I never said that. I implied that working with you was a waste of time, which is entirely different."

Cornelius grinned, but the reply died as the castle bells began to ring.

The same sequence traveled across the garden - a low note, a high one, then the descending scale - and one by one the stone creatures lifted their heads. The cougar turned toward the tower, followed by the lions, wolves, birds, serpent, the absurd six-legged animal near the fountain, and even the small gargoyle above the gate. No command had been given. No spell had been spoken. They simply listened.

The crowd fell silent with them. When the last note faded, the creatures settled into their former poses, and several seconds passed before the garden erupted into applause. Rufus saw the Queen's eyes shine with delight as she turned toward Cornelius and asked whether he had planned the display.

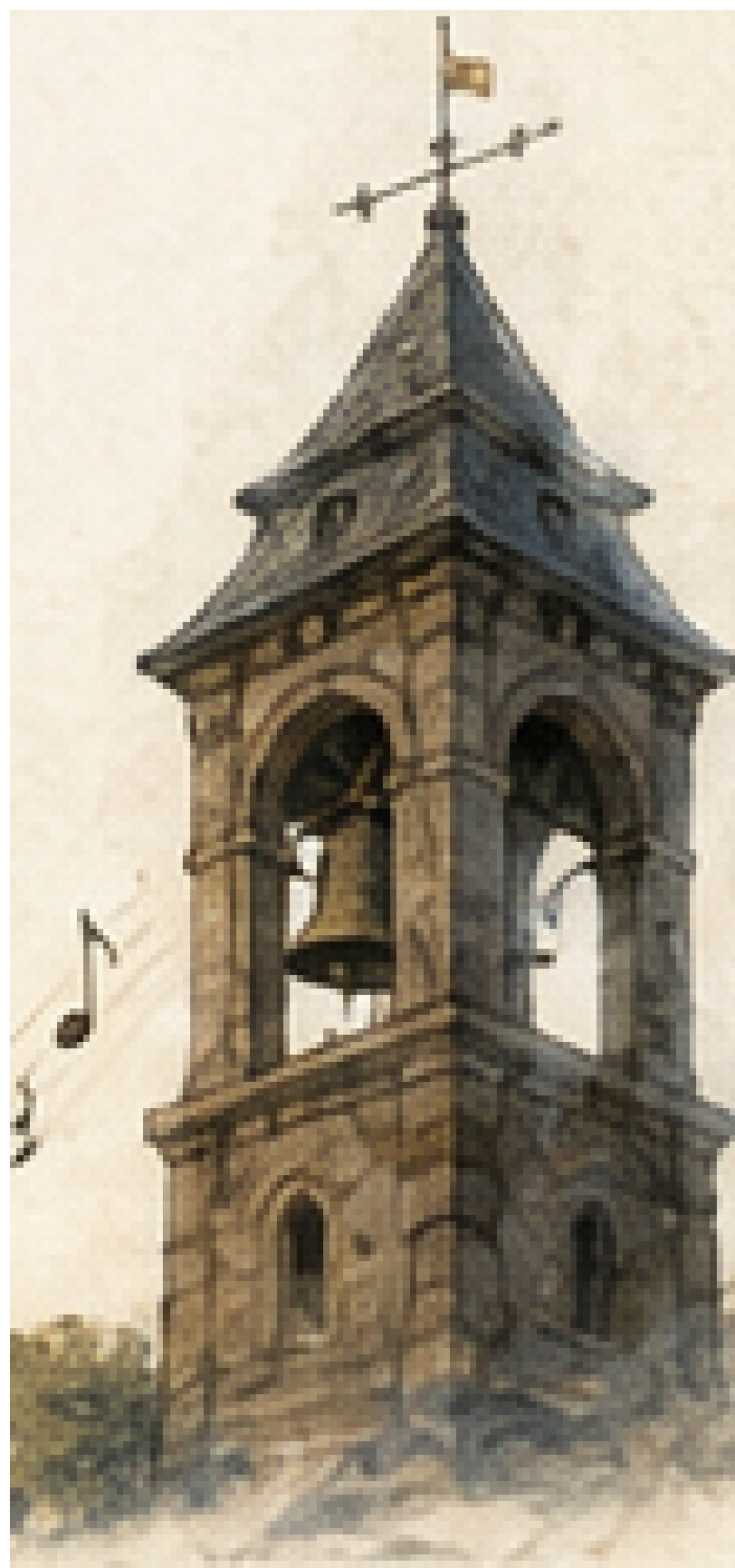
Cornelius hesitated for only a fraction of a second. "Of course."

Rufus looked at him. Cornelius looked back, and neither man had the poor judgment to say anything more.

The festivities continued until evening. Children begged for one more roar from the lion, soldiers invented increasingly ridiculous stories about the serpent, and one old woman spent nearly an hour trying to persuade the gargoyle to smile at her granddaughter. Rufus should have found the noise exhausting. Instead, as he watched the western garden fill with people who no longer approached the castle with lowered voices, he felt an unfamiliar satisfaction settle over him.

Perhaps the Queen had been right. The kingdom possessed enough monuments to everything it had lost. There was no great harm in giving it one place devoted to something new.

#



Long after sunset, when the musicians had packed away their instruments and the last townspeople had gone home, Rufus returned to the western garden alone. Moonlight silvered the statues and the paths between them, making the menagerie look almost ordinary again. The cougar stood where it had remained most of the afternoon, though some child had tied a blue ribbon around one of its paws.

Rufus stopped before it and clasped his hands behind his back. "You caused me a considerable amount of trouble this week. You destroyed a royal breakfast, ruined half the laundry, frightened several dignitaries, and I distinctly remember being licked."

The stone animal offered no defense. Rufus smiled despite himself and placed one hand against its forehead. "Still, I suppose you are not so terrible."

For just an instant he felt warmth move beneath his palm. He pulled his hand away, but the cougar remained perfectly still.

"Talking to statues now?" Cornelius's voice drifted from behind the fountain.

Rufus did not turn. "Go away."

The wizard stepped into the moonlight, declaring that he had known he was rubbing off on the chamberlain. Rufus replied that this was precisely what he feared, but he did not actually leave when Cornelius joined him beside the cougar.

For a little while the two men looked down over the valley without speaking. The lights of the town glowed beneath the castle, the tower rose dark against the stars, and everything appeared peaceful enough to convince a reasonable man that it always would be.

Rufus had never considered himself especially reasonable.

"Cornelius," he said at last. "The drawing."

The wizard sighed. "I knew you would come back to that."

"You expected me not to?"

"I hoped."

Rufus gave him a flat look. "Poorly."

Cornelius rested one hand against the cougar's shoulder and looked beyond the town toward the black mass of the forest. When he finally spoke, there was none of his usual playfulness in the words. "I do not know what the figure was, Rufus. That is the truth."

"But you recognized something."

"I recognized the feeling."

Rufus waited. "What feeling?"

Cornelius remained silent long enough that the question nearly became part of the night around them. At last he drew in a slow breath. "The feeling that something is watching, and that it has been watching for considerably longer than you have known to look back."

A chill moved across Rufus's shoulders despite the warm night. His eyes traveled instinctively toward the forest. "Watching from where?"

Cornelius did not answer. After another moment he clapped Rufus on the shoulder hard enough to make him stagger and turned toward the castle. "Come. We have work tomorrow."

"We always have work tomorrow."

"Exactly. It is comforting."

Rufus followed him along the path, shaking his head. "Nothing about working with you is comforting."

Behind them stood lions, wolves, serpents, gargoyles, and creatures that existed nowhere else in the world. For the present they were guardians, decorations, and works of art, created by a

wizard who wanted the stones to be useful and a reluctant artist who had never expected his drawings to open their eyes.

Years later, few people would remember who had designed them, and fewer still would remember why the Queen had wanted a garden that felt alive. When darker magic once again crept through the Canticle Kingdom, almost no one would recall that the creatures among the trees had not always been monsters. Once, children had climbed over their paws and hidden beneath their wings. Once, a little girl had kissed a stone cougar on the nose. Once, when the kingdom had known more fear than the Queen believed its people should have to bear, the creatures had been made simply to give them something wonderful.

For a little while, they had.

## CONTINUE THE STORY



The stone garden is only one small corner of a kingdom where music, old magic, forgotten history, and impossible doors are waiting to be discovered.

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