ROYAL INSTITUTE OF MAGIC

ELIZABETH'S LEGACY

VICTOR KLOSS

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BOOKS

BY VICTOR KLOSS

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The Shadowseeker

The Protectors

The Silver Dwarf

The Last Guardian

The High Council

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CHAPTER 1
UNWANTED RESCUE

Date: *18th December 1589*

The guard removed the blindfold, and Michael squinted as his eyes adjusted to the torchlight.

"Ask no questions. Be seated," the guard said.

Michael James Greenwood found himself in a lavish hallway with a group of nobles sitting opposite each other. Most ignored him, and those who glanced his way did so with a disdainful air, as if his very presence were an insult. To be fair, Michael didn't exactly blend in. He was half their age and had scruffy blond hair tinted white from flour, having been dragged from his father's bakery less than an hour ago.

Michael turned to the huge guard standing

behind him and raised his eyebrows. Until now, protesting had accomplished nothing except a cuff on the head, but looking at the present company, he felt compelled to give it one more try.

"Sir, this is absurd," he said. "You have the wrong Greenwood. There must be a lord or nobleman with the same surname. I have no association with whomever organised this meeting."

The guard's face darkened. "This meeting has been organised by Her Majesty, the Queen. Unfortunately, there has been no mistake. Now, be seated and be silent."

Michael bit back a reply, not because he was scared but because he was now genuinely curious. The Queen was responsible for this strange congregation? He had only seen the Queen once and that had been from a distance. He was positive she didn't know he existed.

He sat down between two well-to-do gentlemen, giving them both a nod and a smile. He wasn't surprised when neither returned the compliment. They inched away from him, trying to avoid flour ruining their expensive garments.

Michael noticed many were fidgeting. Did they know something he didn't? The guards had told him nothing when they had appeared at his father's bakery and whisked him to the castle. They would only say he wasn't in trouble and he would be

returned unharmed before the end of the day. Michael had been escorted to the main entrance and then blindfolded before entering.

"Lord Frederick Arnold," the guard said, breaking the nervous silence and interrupting his thoughts.

A heavyset man rose and walked to the guard, who was standing next to a door halfway down the corridor. The guard spoke quietly to the Lord. Michael couldn't hear what was said, but the Lord pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his gleaming forehead. He took a deep breath, opened the door and disappeared inside. There were a few restrained gasps. Michael saw fear in some faces but respect in others.

Michael tapped his fingers on his knees. He was tempted to ask someone if they knew what was happening, but was fairly certain it would earn him another cuff from the guard. Could there have been some instruction he had missed? More likely these lords and ladies, with their wealth and contacts, knew something. Whatever they had learnt, it wasn't inspiring them with confidence.

After the Lord disappeared through the door, Michael had expected the excitement to build, but silence resumed. Five minutes passed before the guard opened the same door and poked his head through. Evidently he was satisfied with what he saw, for he called another name. A "Lady Janet

Harris" stood up and walked to the guard, showing marginally more composure than the Lord. Hushed whispers were again exchanged, and the woman stepped through the same door.

Twenty more times this happened, until it was just Michael Greenwood sitting amongst all the empty chairs, feeling just as clueless as when he had arrived.

"Master Michael Greenwood."

He felt a flutter of nerves as he stood up. He knew he should have been scared or at least concerned like the others, but he wasn't. He was curious. What lay behind the door? He had seen the guard whisper instructions countless times in the last hour and he was itching to know what the man said.

"You will not be held accountable for whatever decision you make beyond this door," the guard said.

Michael felt both short-changed by the brevity of the instructions and excited by the mystery of them.

"Can you tell me what this is all about?" Michael asked.

"No, but I can tell you why you found yourself surrounded by nobility. You are part of a small group of citizens they are experimenting with to see how certain commoners perform on the test."

"What sort of commoners?"

"Young, able to read and write, physically and

mentally adept. There aren't many of you, thankfully."

"So I'm an experiment?"

"Yes." The guard's face showed less empathy than the surrounding stone walls. "If you want my advice, you should walk away. The Institute is an elite organisation and should not be sullied by the common man."

"Thank you for your kind words of support, sir," Michael said. He turned the handle before the guard could reply and entered the room.

His body was tense and on edge, ready to react to any potential danger that might emerge. Michael was half expecting a fully suited knight to come flying at him and he was almost disappointed when his eyes adjusted to the dim light inside the room.

It was empty, except for a single chair and an ornate desk in the centre of a small square room. At the back were double doors, so large they spanned most of the wall. On the left was a much smaller door. The only thing that caught Michael's interest was a golden sword hanging on the right-hand wall. It was encased in an elaborate frame, behind a sheet of glass. Inlaid in the handle were jewels that made him stare in wonder.

Dragging his eyes away from the sword, he walked to the desk; perhaps there was something in the many drawers that would enlighten him.

He stopped sharply before he had taken his first step.

There was something *floating* inches above the desk.

It was parchment standing upright, as if it were attached to a piece of string that hung from the ceiling. Though there was no wind in the room, the parchment was rippling gently.

Had it been there a moment ago? Surely he would have noticed it? But then, he wasn't accustomed to checking for items floating above desks.

Even from a distance he could see the flowing script of ink on the parchment. He moved closer and ran his hand above it, searching for the fine piece of string that held it afloat. He felt nothing. Intrigued, Michael walked around the desk, inspecting the parchment from all angles, but he couldn't see anything holding it in place. Michael gave the parchment an experimental poke. It rippled and smoothly returned to its original position.

Michael rubbed his chin. Whatever trickery was being employed, it was nothing he had ever seen before. He turned his attention to the writing on the parchment with growing curiosity.

To: All Royal Institute of Magic applicants
From: Queen Elizabeth, Commander of the Royal Institute of Magic

Welcome,
I imagine you are full of questions and, I hope, curiosity rather than fear. Let me assure you that you are in no kind of difficulty; quite the opposite.
You have been carefully selected to apply for a position in the Royal Institute of Magic. Due to the secretive nature of our organisation, you will be unaware of its value to our country.
Allow me to enlighten you.
Last year we fought and achieved a great victory against the Spanish Armada. That victory was made possible through the Royal Institute of Magic. I cannot reveal the part the Institute played except to stress its importance.

Michael stopped reading and sat down before he fell down. If he weren't in the castle right now, he would have disregarded the whole document as some sort of joke. His eyes flicked to the bottom of the document, and he saw the Queen's signature. This Royal Institute of Magic was responsible for the victory against the Spanish? His curiosity well and truly piqued, Michael continued reading.

Your application to the Institute is subject to your willingness and an entrance examination.
I will not lie to you. This examination will frighten you. It will shake your beliefs to the core. I would not have passed what you are about to attempt. Four weeks it

took me to learn and accept the truth. You will have one hour.
I can give you some advice. Forget what you think you know about witchcraft and its association with the devil. Look and listen to what you encounter; true observation is more important than hearsay.
Should you fail the examination or wish to stop, you may leave at any time. You shall not be punished. The success rate is less than one per hundred, so do not be disheartened.
If you succeed, you shall work for our country's most prestigious institute, and you will serve directly under me. The government has no knowledge of our existence. Choose wisely. Though you will be remunerated well, you shall also face great evil. We have enemies far more dangerous than the Spanish or the French and only the Royal Institute of Magic can stand against them.
Should you wish to apply, proceed through the double doors that lie ahead of you—if not, take the door to the left and you will never hear from us again.

Whatever your choice, I wish you good fortune.
Elizabeth.

Michael leant back on the chair and took a deep breath in an attempt to calm his thumping heart.

This was crazy! The Queen—*the Queen*—was talking about witchcraft and the devil. No wonder

this document could only be read in this enclosed room. If this got to the wrong people, civil war could break out.

The letter answered some questions, but it posed many more. What exactly was this Royal Institute of Magic? The document was very careful not to reveal anything about it. Michael re-read the section about the test, and his stomach gave a little lurch.

How long did he have to make a decision? Surely the guard would come in soon to check on him. Would he be disqualified if he were still in here?

It didn't matter. Michael had made his mind up even before he'd finished reading. He was not yet twenty, but already he knew the baker's life was not for him. His father had told him many times if he worked hard, he would one day inherit the bakery. But working sixty hours a week for the next twenty years in a profession he had no affection for was a very dispiriting thought.

Besides, Michael wasn't sure he could stand walking away from something as crazy as this. The test scared him a little, but Michael was a fool for mysteries and had always been too curious for his own good. How could he *not* go in?

He eyed the double doors. What dangers lay beyond them? Whatever they were, Michael had nothing to defend himself with. That could be a problem.

Michael remembered the golden sword. He went up to it, feeling the glass, tapping it with his knuckles. Emblazoned on its hilt was Queen Elizabeth's royal coat of arms. Was the sword there for a reason? He briefly weighed the dangers of getting in trouble with the guard versus the potential advantage of passing the test armed with a shining sword. It wasn't a hard decision to make.

He grabbed the chair and with a giant heave swung it into the glass frame. There was an almighty crash and the sword fell to the floor, along with shards of glass.

He picked up the weapon. Before the guard had time to investigate the noise, Michael ran to the double doors, grabbed the iron handle and disappeared through them.