ROYAL INSTITUTE OF MAGIC

THE SHADOWSEEKER

VICTOR KLOSS

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Vinci Books
vinci-books.com
Published by Vinci Books Ltd in 2026

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
Paperback ISBN: 9781036706586
The EU GPSR authorised representative is Logos Europe, 9 rue Nicolas Poussion, 17000 La Rochelle, France
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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

CHAPTER 1
A NEW COMMANDER

Date: *29th March 1603*

"Spellshooters are not permitted in Prince Henry's throne room." The guard felt the full force of stares from Michael James Greenwood and Charlotte Rowe. To his credit, he didn't flinch. Much.

Michael extended his hands, palms up. "Eric, how many times have you let me in fully armed when I was summoned by our last commander?"

Eric remained resolute. "The Queen is dead, Director. The Prince has new rules."

Eric's crass remark almost earned him a black eye, but Michael swallowed his anger. The truth was, Eric, like everyone else at the Institute, was still reeling from the Queen's death.

Everyone except the Queen's son.

It had been only five days since she passed away, and Michael still half-expected Elizabeth to return from the dead. She had done it before.

"I'm sorry, Director Rowe, but your forreck is not allowed in either," Eric said. He had gone quite pale and was looking fearfully at the animal standing next to Charlotte. It was the size of a large tiger, with jet black fur, except for a white stripe that zigzagged down its back and covered its tail. The forreck's eyes were like two brilliant sapphires, and they stared right at Eric with the sort of confident composure that reminded Michael of a cat.

Charlotte raised an eyebrow. She was petite and almost doll-like in appearance, with flawless skin and soft features. But the steely determination in her large brown eyes and the five yellow diamonds floating above her shoulder made people stand up and take notice of the Director of Trade. She stroked the forreck's forehead, which came up to her shoulders.

"You wish to stop George from entering? That would not be wise. He may become angry if I leave him."

Michael almost felt sorry for Eric. If he let the forreck in, he would face the wrath of Prince Henry. If he didn't, he might face an angry forreck. As

unpleasant as Prince Henry's wrath was, Michael knew there was only ever going to be one outcome.

"You may pass," Eric said, stepping aside, eyes still trained on the forreck.

"You're too kind," Michael said graciously, handing over his spellshooter with a mock bow.

Michael put his hand on the door but didn't open it immediately. His good humour was momentarily replaced with a frown, and he turned towards Charlotte. "Be careful what you say when we go in. We could be in danger, especially if Prince Henry talks about you know what."

"I will be on my guard," Charlotte said.

Michael opened the door; Charlotte and George followed him in.

Prince Henry sat on a gilded chair in the centre of a spacious, exquisitely furnished room. The last time Michael had been in here, Queen Elizabeth had sat in the chair. It didn't seem to suit the Prince as well as it had the Queen; he sat awkwardly, his back so straight it was almost arched. Michael was again struck by how alike and yet different Henry was to his mother. He had the same curly auburn hair, hooked nose and peculiar gold tint in his eyes, but the calm, regal aura Elizabeth had was missing. Instead, his eyes seemed constantly narrowed, as if he suspected everyone and everything.

"Welcome, directors," Henry said. His eyes went straight to the forreck, and Michael saw the Prince fail to mask a flicker of fear. "It seems I need a new guard, one that will obey my orders and not allow dangerous animals in my vicinity."

"It is not Eric's fault, Your Highness," Charlotte said, with a small but perfect curtsey. "It is safer for my forreck to remain with me."

"I see." The Prince continued to regard the forreck, his lips pursed, fingers tapping the chair. "I believe it will soon be time to do something about forrecks. They are simply too dangerous to be roaming around."

"They helped us win wars," Charlotte said.

"Any animal that can best a dragon should be strictly controlled," Henry continued, either not hearing Charlotte or simply ignoring her. "Yes, I will do something about that during my reign."

Michael could sense Charlotte struggling to keep her temper. She made to reply, but Michael nudged her in the ribs.

"You summoned us, Your Highness?" Michael said, switching subjects.

Prince Henry finally looked away from the forreck. "Yes, I did. However, I was expecting all of you. Where are the other directors?"

"They will be here presently," Michael said.

The Prince nodded. "I would have called this meeting sooner, but I have been extremely busy since my mother passed away. As you know, my mother and I often had differences of opinion when it came to governing the Institute, and there were several occasions where we didn't see eye to eye. One in particular was her method of choosing directors, the most senior of Institute positions, which should never be taken lightly."

Prince Henry paused, and Michael knew he was trying to build the suspense, but to his disappointment, neither Charlotte nor Michael reacted.

"With that in mind, I will be conducting a thorough review to establish whether you are still the most suitable choices as directors of the Institute."

Michael had been expecting this, and he remained impassive, though it didn't make it any easier to take. Charlotte made a small choking sound, but to her credit managed to stay calm.

"Queen Elizabeth promoted me to Director of Trade ten years ago and I have never let her down," Charlotte said. "I have opened up trade agreements with countless Unseen Kingdoms, which has helped the Institute flourish."

Prince Henry gave a curt nod before Charlotte had finished speaking, and Michael suspected he wasn't even listening.

"You two are the perfect example of my mother's poor decision making," the Prince said, giving them a disapproving frown. "Your breeding, Michael, leaves much to be desired, coming from a family of poor bakers. And while you, Charlotte, are at least nobly born, I was always sceptical of having a woman in such a powerful position within the Institute. Indeed, the only director I am satisfied with is Lord Samuel."

Michael could have made several choice replies, but they would only get him in trouble. Prince Henry was just as stubborn as his mother and his mind would not be easily swayed.

"We will endeavour to prove ourselves worthy of our position," Michael said, giving a stiff bow. "Is there anything else you require of us?"

The Prince nodded. "There is one other thing. My mother had an exquisitely crafted suit of armour that used to reside in this very room. Do you happen to know where it went?"

Michael feigned mild surprise. "No, I'm afraid not, Your Highness."

Prince Henry ran a hand over his chin thoughtfully. "That is most peculiar. You are sure you haven't seen it recently? I would very much like to have it. It has powerful magic that was specifically intended for my bloodline."

There was an edge to the Prince's voice, and the gold flecks in his eyes seemed to glow for an instant.

Michael was conscious of the guards surreptitiously putting their hands on their spellshooters, but unless they had death wishes, they wouldn't act while George was still in the room.

"I will issue a search for it immediately," Michael said.

There was a moment when the Prince's narrowed eyes tried to bore holes through Michael, but the Spellsword Director met the Prince's stare without flinching.

"Very well," the Prince said finally. "I will expect a daily report on your progress. If it is not found within the week, I will not be pleased. You are dismissed."

Michael and Charlotte made their bows, and then left the throne room, with George in tow. When Michael was sure they were out of earshot from any prying guards, he started talking, quickly and urgently.

"Find the others. I need to see them before the Prince does." "What are you going to do?" Charlotte asked.

"Each director needs to hide the piece of Elizabeth's Armour they were entrusted with. It needs to be done today, before Prince Henry can sniff them out. You can bet he has people searching for the Armour already."

"I have somewhere in mind," Charlotte said. She scowled suddenly and clenched her fists. "I've never

wanted to hit a member of royalty before, until today. I can't believe how he insulted us."

"I'll deal with the Prince," Michael said, his expression darkening. "We can't worry about that now. The Armour is far more important. It needs to stay safely hidden until Suktar's return."

They stopped by the double doors that led to the open gallery and the spiral staircase.

"I can't believe we will have to face Suktar again. When do you think he will resurface?"

Michael shrugged. "It could be months, years or it could be centuries. Should that happen, it will be up to our descendants to reunite the Armour to stop Suktar."

Charlotte tugged her braid. "Centuries? The Institute may not even exist then, especially if we have many more Prince Henrys in command."

"The Institute will survive. It has to."

"What about our descendants?" Charlotte said. "We are asking a great deal of them. If they have to wait centuries, they may not even know about the Institute anymore."

"We have to make sure that doesn't happen," Michael said. He gave a sudden grin, his eyes sparkling. "As for our descendants, we Greenwoods have a long history of getting things done. Whether it's one year or five hundred, I'm confident my family will be able to reunite the Armour and topple Suktar

once and for all." "I wish I shared your optimism," Charlotte said.

Michael put a friendly arm around Charlotte's shoulder. "We Greenwoods are also optimists. You should try it sometime; it makes life a lot easier. Come, let's get back to work. We have much to do."

CHAPTER 2
THE WAIT IS OVER

Present Day

A sharp rapping on Ben Greenwood's door woke him with a start.

"Ben Greenwood!" His step-grandmother Anne's voice was even shriller than usual. "I don't know what you think you're playing at, but it's 7:36am and there's no milk in the house. You know how much I enjoy my tea while I watch the morning news. Is this some sort of cruel joke?"

Ben thought about trying to drown his grandma out by putting a pillow over his head, but her voice could penetrate a three-foot-thick steel vault. He sat up and yawned.

"There was milk last night when I checked," Ben said, his voice croaky from sleep.

"That was barely enough for my Coco Pops this morning. How many times have I told you to keep at least two cartons in the fridge?"

"None," Ben said softly to himself. Then in a louder voice he said, "I'll go get some, Grandma."

"I need it in the next ten minutes, so get a move on." She gave another rap on his door. "And stop calling me Grandma. Do you ever listen to me?"

"I try not to," Ben said, making no attempt to keep his voice down.

There was a huff from the other side of the door and then some muttering—Ben heard the words "ungrateful" and "selfish" mentioned—before Anne headed back downstairs.

Normally Ben would have gone straight back to bed—after all, it was the start of the summer holidays, and no self-respecting teenager would be up before 8am. But today was different. Today was special. Today was his first day as an apprentice at the Royal Institute of Magic.

Ben sprang out of bed, heady with excitement. It had only been a couple of weeks since his adventures at the Institute, but when he had been told he would have to wait until the end of July to start the apprenticeship, it had seemed a lifetime away. Each day seemed to contain twice as many hours, and he and Charlie had exhausted every possible subject on the Institute until there was nothing left to do but

wait patiently. Patience was not one of Ben's strengths.

Suppressing another yawn—he'd had trouble getting to sleep last night—Ben threw on a pair of his newer jeans and a plain white t-shirt. He spent a moment in the bathroom taming his wavy blond hair. His deep blue eyes were full of life and showed no sign of his poor night's sleep.

Ben hurried downstairs. The kitchen was a mess again, filled with dirty dishes. The fridge was left ajar —probably from Anne's search for milk—and from it came an unpleasant smell. Ignoring the urge to clean up, Ben headed out to the corner shop to get some milk.

It was 8:15am by the time Ben had returned and downed some breakfast. He went back to his room, preferring to keep his distance from his grandma and the blaring TV she had on. Charlie was due over in fifteen minutes and together they would set off to the Institute. Ben found himself checking the time every thirty seconds.

Ben couldn't decide what he was most looking forward to: the apprenticeship programme; the Unseen Kingdoms; the magic; the ridiculously cool dragon transport system; or the Institute itself. More significantly, he would have the chance to keep looking for his parents. They were out there somewhere. He was sure he had seen them during the final

battle at the Floating Prison. Why they hadn't come back for him was still a mystery that constantly played on his mind, and he was determined to find out.

His thoughts were disrupted by a buzzing in his pocket. He pulled his mobile out and saw a text from Charlie.

"I'm outside. Can you come out? I'd rather not have another encounter with the devil (carefully disguised as your grandma)."

Ben grinned, grabbed the backpack he had packed last night, and bounded down the stairs three at a time.

"I'm going out for the day," Ben told his grandma. She had her back to him, facing the TV, but turned around slowly in her swivel recliner.

"I hope you're going to look for a job," she said, eyeing him suspiciously. "You need to start pulling your weight around here at some point. My pension isn't designed for two."

"I've got a job," Ben said firmly. "In fact, that's where I'm going now." He gave her a friendly wave and his most impudent grin. "I'll be back late, so don't wait up."

He left before she could respond with another barbed comment and found Charlie outside, standing by a large tree in front of the neighbour's house.

"I needed the tree to hide behind in case your grandmother stepped outside," Charlie explained, as they started down the road together. "I swear she can sense when I'm around; it's uncanny and, frankly, quite scary."

Almost as scary as his grandma, in Ben's opinion, were the clothes Charlie was wearing. He had a blue and white chequered shirt with beige trousers—both looked like they'd been ironed to within an inch of their lives. His black leather shoes shone as if he'd spent the last hour buffing them and he wore a large backpack with both straps over his shoulders. It was clearly heavy because he was hunched over while carrying it, making him look even smaller than usual. There was even a glean of sweat on his forehead.

"I want to make a good impression," Charlie said, when Ben questioned his choice of clothes. "I know you'll breeze through the apprenticeship programme, but it's not going to be easy for me."

"I doubt that," Ben replied. "Anyway, there will be plenty of studying to do, which you're great at. We have a whole new world to learn about. You'll be fine, trust me."

Charlie brightened a little, and started to show some of the excitement that was threatening to burst at Ben's seams.

"I can't believe we're finally going," Charlie said. "I had to make up the most terrible lie to fool my

parents. I told them I'd been accepted for an apprenticeship programme at a respectable web design firm. They took it rather well, but I have a feeling Wren had one of her Spellswords do some sort of magic to help them buy it."

"Wouldn't surprise me," Ben said. "Anyway, your parents work all hours of the week, right? And you'll be home on the weekends."

"Yeah," Charlie said, lapping up the support. "They won't miss me. So, what do you think our first day will be like? I've gone over it in my head a hundred times and each one is different."

They talked with growing excitement for the next twenty minutes through the dull housing estate to the town centre. The weather was perfect, with blue skies and a bright sun beaming down on them, adding to their good moods.

"Did you hear that?" Charlie asked suddenly, raising a finger. He rolled his eyes, indicating that the sound came from behind.

Ben glanced casually backwards and saw two men in suits walking behind them, deep in conversation. Ben perked his ears up to listen.

"...I've seen four Wardens already," the taller of the two was saying. "I've never seen so much security around the Croydon headquarters before."

Ben couldn't believe they were talking so openly about the Institute on such a busy street. There were

people constantly walking alongside and past them. Strangely, nobody seemed interested in what the two men were saying. Was everyone completely lost in their own worlds or was there something more to it?

"I've seen five Wardens," the smaller man was saying. "You didn't see the one at the corner just now. Slim fella, easy to miss. There are probably half a dozen others we missed. The good ones are impossible to spot. You think this is all because of the dark elves?"

"Course it is," the taller one said. His voice was deep and gruff, even for his size. "The Institute has been on alert for the last couple of weeks. Haven't you heard the rumours about the invasion on Fiorgan?"

"I heard the dark elves were threatening to attack, but they haven't done anything yet."

The tall man gave a humph. "Could happen any moment. I heard there have been plenty of troop movements—and that's *not* rumour. Let's not forget how tactically important Fiorgan is. It's the gateway to Europe."

"I know how important it is; I'm not an idiot," the small man said, resentment in his voice. "But why would they post so many Wardens here?"

"Because the dark elves are masters at creating havoc. It wouldn't surprise me if they sent all manner of creatures here to distract the Institute."

"That's true," the small man conceded. He paused for a moment and then, in a lighter tone of voice, said, "What did you think of United's performance yesterday? I can't believe they shipped two goals right at the end."

Ben stopped listening and turned to Charlie; his eyes were wide, his sizeable cheeks flushed.

"That was interesting," Ben said. He gave a quick look round, but could see no sign of anyone who looked like a Warden.

"I wonder if the Wardens are here for another reason," Charlie said.

"What do you mean?"

Charlie looked around surreptitiously before leaning into Ben. "What if they are here to protect you from the dark elves?"

Ben scoffed the idea. "Me? I don't think so. I'm not that important."

Charlie wagged a chubby finger at him. "No, you're not. But you're the link to your parents, remember? And the dark elves still want them. What's to say they won't make another move for you to try to get to your parents again?"

"Possibly," Ben said. "I just can't believe the Institute would go through all that trouble to protect me. After all, they don't even know *why* the dark elves want my parents."

This time both he and Charlie looked around, to make sure nobody was close by.

"I've been thinking about Elizabeth's Armour," Charlie said, his voice now a whisper. "How much do the dark elves know? Are they aware that it's split up into different families? If so, are they also hunting the other families?"

Ben had spent countless hours thinking the same thing. "It's impossible to know. But if they are, then it's going to be twice as hard for my parents, trying to avoid the dark elves and get to the other descendants before the dark elves do."

Charlie tapped his chin thoughtfully, but any reply he might have made was drowned out by a succession of beeping cars. They had entered the heart of the town, and the roads were jammed as everyone rushed to work. The pavement was equally busy, with men and women on phones, listening to music or just lost in their own worlds. A few people filtered into coffee shops, but most hurried past the high street, with the single intention of getting to their offices before the clock struck nine.

Ben knew the Institute's Croydon headquarters were difficult to spot, despite knowing the exact location. Sure enough, his eyes wandered past the O2 mobile store to the Starbucks coffee shop several times before he spotted the building in the middle. It was small, squeezed in between the two, and

purposefully unassuming. Above the revolving door and frosted windows, inlaid into the brickwork, was the R.I.M. logo, cast in bronze and overlaying a royal coat of arms. In front of the door was the same bulky bodyguard they had encountered when they first entered.

Ben felt a thrill of excitement from his back down to his toes. Just beyond those innocent-looking revolving doors was the start of an adventure that had changed their lives just two weeks ago.

"Look at that guy," Charlie said. He was pointing to a slim man dressed in casual clothes, standing outside Starbucks, holding a hot drink. Ben noted the way he was looking closely at everyone who entered the Institute.

"You think he's another Warden?" Ben said.

"I think so. I wonder how many more there are around?"

"Several probably," Ben said. He drew out his brand new ID card. It was made of silver and was heavy enough to feel valuable. Next to the embossed logo on the card the name "Ben Greenwood" was etched.

"Shall we go in?" Ben asked Charlie, with a grin.