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THE PROTECTORS

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CHAPTER 1
THE HELM'S FIRST GUARDIAN

Date: *5th June 1613*

Michael Greenwood took one look at his battered house door and frowned. He could hear voices and furniture being smashed. It sounded like there were at least half a dozen men inside, most likely armed with objects intended for breaking things.

They had arrived earlier than expected. They were getting brave. Brave but stupid.

Michael eased the spellshooter from his holster and fired it at his front door. It exploded inwards, chunks of wood flying everywhere. Michael calmly stepped over the debris and entered what was left of the living room. Furniture had been thrown across

the floor, fabric ripped to shreds, floorboards ripped up, and the walls scarred with bludgeons and slashes.

"Jake, he's here!"

The voice came from a brute of a man, who had momentarily stopped hacking away at a sofa and was now staring at Michael with a hint of anxiety in his eyes.

Michael glanced at the stairs, and he saw a small, skinny man with a pointed nose and small, watery eyes that were staring at Michael's spellshooter.

"You're not supposed to be here till sunset," Jake said, almost accusingly, pausing halfway down the stairs. He looked ready to hurry back up them.

"I'm sorry – should I come back at a more convenient time?"

Jake started to nod before he recognised the sarcasm.

Michael dropped the light-hearted tone. "What are you doing here?"

Though it looked like wanton destruction by a bunch of thugs, Michael knew there was more to it.

Jake gave a sinister smile and waved his hand, resuming a slow, deliberate walk down the stairs. "Gather round, men; our guest has arrived early."

Six other men appeared, and they formed a line opposite Michael, with Jake in the centre, a good head smaller than the rest.

Michael stared at them all impassively, and gave no ground, despite being close enough to smell their foul body odour. He raised his spellshooter and a couple of the men gave an involuntary shuffle backwards.

"I'm not at my most patient when my house is being destroyed, so I'm going to ask you one more time. What are you doing here?"

To Michael's surprise, Jake smiled. "You don't scare me, Director. They told me it's against the law to fire your spellshooter against an unarmed man. You fire that and you'll go to prison."

"Who told you that?"

"Doesn't matter who," Jake said, with a sneer. "Now, because I'm feeling generous I'm going to give you five seconds to shove off, so we can complete what we came for. Do I make myself clear?"

There was a murmur of good humour from his lackeys, and Ben saw a few of them relax, and cross their arms.

Michael pointed his spellshooter at the man on the left, and fired. A disc of white energy slammed into his chest and the thug went flying, crashing hard against the back wall. He didn't get up again. The thugs watched their companion collapse and then turned, slowly, back to Michael. Confidence had been swiftly replaced by something approaching horror.

"I'm going to ask you once more," Michael said

calmly. “If I don’t get an answer I like, another of you will feel the unpleasant force of my spellshooter. Do I make myself clear?”

Jake shook his head, a finger pointing accusingly. “You’re in right trouble now, Greenwood. My boss is a powerful—”

Michael fired again; this time, the thug on the right crashed lifelessly against the wall.

“The only thing that is sparing you right now is the fact that you appear to be in charge,” Michael said, keeping his voice even. “However, I am starting to get frustrated, so you will be next unless you can give me a sensible answer. What are you doing here?”

Jake gave one more withering look at the spellshooter, and his shoulders slumped. “We were told to look for a weapon – a sword of magnificence and majesty.”

“Told by whom?”

“A rich gentleman. I had never met him before, though he knew all about the services I offer.”

“A name?”

Jake shrugged. “He called himself Lord Plunkett, though I doubt that is his real name. He had a birthmark on his right cheek.”

Michael gave a little nod to himself, appearing unsurprised. He considered what to do with the sorry group left standing. His anger was swiftly being redirected to the real enemy, not the idiots before him.

"Gather your fallen friends and get out of my house," Michael said, after a moment's silence. "Tomorrow I expect you back at daybreak, when you will repair my house, top to bottom. If you fail to turn up, I will find you and it will not be pleasant."

Jake was the first to leave, dashing out the front door. The others gathered their fallen companions and stumbled out moments later.

Michael holstered his spellshooter and surveyed the damage, thankful that his family was away visiting his parents-in-law. He grabbed a chair, dusted it off and sat down. He glanced at the timber frames holding the ceiling up. They had been stabbed and slashed, as if the sword they were looking for might somehow be embedded in the wood.

Things were starting to get out of hand. Michael knew something had to be done, but the only solution that might work was one he was loath to take.

"Is this a bad time?"

A deep, friendly voice floated in from outside. Without waiting for an answer, an elderly gentleman stepped inside. He was wearing a long, grey cloak, which matched his perfectly trimmed silver beard. His kind blue eyes were narrowed with less concern than one might expect given the destruction that greeted him.

"I see they paid you a visit too," Timothy Dawson said.

Michael stood up. He cursed himself for being a selfish fool. He hadn't for a moment considered the others.

"Are the other directors okay?" Michael asked.

"Yes, yes. Lord Samuel didn't even get raided, much to everyone's astonishment," Timothy said dryly. "I assume the king is responsible?"

"Of course he is," Michael said, beginning a slow pace around the room, kicking the odd bit of debris that got in his way. "Though it will never get back to him. Even he isn't idiotic enough to openly raid a director's home without justifiable reason."

"Not yet, but he seems to be getting increasingly reckless. The king is growing manic about finding the Armour," Timothy said. "It's quite sad, really. He wasn't too bad before the queen died, but he has worsened considerably since taking the throne."

"It's not entirely his fault," Michael said. "Elizabeth warned me about this. The Armour will affect the weak-willed, and our king, unfortunately, is not of strong mind."

"What will he do next, do you think?" Timothy asked.

"I'm not entirely sure, but I have a plan that might help us, and even the king, if we can pull it off. It's dangerous, though."

"Your plans normally are," Timothy said, nodding. He walked idly to the window and stared

outside, hands behind his back. “I, however, have a problem that even your wonderful schemes can’t solve.”

“Your grandson?”

“I’m afraid so.”

The news produced a far harder blow to Michael’s stomach than any of the thugs could have managed.

“I trust your judgement, but can you be absolutely certain?” Michael asked. “Surely something can be done?”

Timothy gave a small sigh and a nod of the head. “I’m afraid not. Henry has just been promoted to captain, and he is the spitting image of his father, a Royalist to the bitter end. I know without a shadow of a doubt that the moment my grandson inherits the helm, he will hand it over to the king. Worse, he will take considerable pride in doing so.”

Michael ran a weary hand down his face. “And your son?”

“You’ve seen my son,” Timothy said. “Neither are an option, if we wish to keep Elizabeth’s Helm from the king.”

“So what is to be done?” Michael said, feeling a stab of irritation. Ten years had passed since the queen had passed away and there had not been a day when he hadn’t had to think about the safety of the

Armour. “Do you want to wait in the hope that your grandson has a child with more sense?”

Timothy turned away from the window to face Michael with a tired smile that showed every inch of his seventy years. “I will not live long enough to see any possible great-grandson inherit the helm.”

“What other option do we have?” Michael asked. “We are the Guardians. The Armour must be protected by our blood.”

Timothy didn’t speak for a while. “There is one option,” he said eventually. “It is, even by your standards, highly dangerous and fraught with failure.”

Timothy took his spellshooter out and casually fired a spell into the ceiling. A shimmering, ethereal bubble formed around him and Michael. With a cursory check out the window, Timothy turned back to Michael and explained his plan.

When Timothy finished, it was some time before Michael spoke.

“You’re right,” he said eventually. “That plan is so dangerous it borders on insane.”

Timothy nodded. “I will not deny it. But it is the only hope we have of keeping the helm from the king and with my family.”

Michael tapped his chin thoughtfully. “I know there is nobody more knowledgeable than you when it comes to the ways of magic, but I am bound to ask again – are you sure this can work?”

"Nothing is one hundred percent certain, not even the sun rising tomorrow. But with everything we know of Elizabeth's legacy, this is our best chance."

"It's mad," Michael said again. Then he grinned and slapped his hand on his thigh. "Let's do it."