ROYAL INSTITUTE OF MAGIC

THE LAST GUARDIAN

VICTOR KLOSS

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1
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CHAPTER 1
Unlikely Allies

Date: *3rd January 1603*

Michael Greenwood glanced up at the extravagant house and knew there was going to be trouble. Rumour had it that this was the most expensive residence in London – a rumour, no doubt spread by its owner, Lord Samuel, Guardian of Elizabeth's Shield.

Michael gave a firm rap of the iron-wrought handle and waited. He wasn't armed, as he knew Samuel would never let him inside with a sword or spellshooter. He shouldn't have any need for weapons, but with Lord Samuel, you never knew.

Michael heard the sound of footsteps from within and composed himself. Lord Samuel had requested

the meeting, and though he hadn't said what it was about, Michael had a good idea.

Queen Elizabeth's Armour.

The specifics of the conversation were a little harder to guess, as the queen's instructions had been very clear. Those entrusted as Guardians were to safeguard their designated piece of armour until the dark elf king, Suktar, returned.

Michael was still pondering the matter when the door swung open. Samuel's butler was dressed in an immaculate, tailored black suit, which was probably more expensive than anything Michael owned.

"Mr. Greenwood," the butler said with a slight bow. "Do come in. Lord Samuel has been waiting."

Michael stepped inside to a grand hall that was almost as big as his entire house. A lavish staircase ran up the middle, and split two ways to an open gallery. There were large portraits lining the walls, most of them of Samuel, though a few were of his family.

"This way, please, Mr. Greenwood," the butler said, directing him with a pristine, white-gloved hand.

Michael followed the butler through several drawing rooms, each lavishly decorated by Lady Samuel, until they reached a set of double doors, which the butler pushed open and walked through, Michael following just behind.

As magnificent as the previous rooms were, this one rivalled the queen's palace. Perhaps that was the idea, Michael thought. A huge, glistening chandelier hung from the ceiling, casting a soft light on thick carpet and lavish furniture. The room was so large, it was divided into sections. There was a reading area and a section for music, complete with a grand piano. Small tables, decorated with flowers, vases and antiques, were dotted everywhere.

"Greenwood. You decided to turn up, I see," a deep, overbearing voice said.

Lord Samuel sat, legs crossed, on a black leather couch, holding a drink. It had been only a week since they had last met, but Samuel seemed to have managed to gain a few pounds, mainly around the chin. His hair, too, somehow seemed thinner, but he compensated that with a thick, perfectly groomed moustache.

He didn't get up, nor did he offer Michael a drink. The couch Samuel sat on was large, but the big man somehow seemed to consume most of it, so Michael chose a small chair nearby. He noted the spellshooter strapped to Samuel's waist, but was careful not to show any concern.

"I shan't waste both our time with social pleasantries," Lord Samuel said. Michael had to resist the urge to put a finger in his ear to partially mute

Samuel's booming voice. “You must know why you're here.”

“Not really,” Michael said with a shrug. “I'm assuming it's something to do with Elizabeth's Armour.”

“Of course it is,” Samuel said, tapping his glass impatiently. “But more than that, it's about the mistake our queen made, most likely due to her poor health.”

“What mistake is that?” Michael asked.

“You know very well,” Samuel said. His face looked a little red, but Michael couldn't tell if it was from the drink or his simmering anger. “I'm referring to the fact that she put you in charge. She made *you* the Head Guardian.”

Michael couldn't help noticing the contemptuous way in which Lord Samuel said “you”.

“It was her choice,” Michael said, keeping his voice light.

“Impossible,” Lord Samuel said. His moustache twitched as he shook his head. “Her decision was clearly clouded by her ill health. Have you seen her recently? She won't last much longer.”

Michael couldn't argue that point. The queen was now confined to bed and, with a heavy heart, he knew it wouldn't be long before they had a new commander at the Institute.

"I saw her recently and was sorry to see that she was so poorly," Michael said with a nod.

Samuel seemed to relax a little at this. "Then you agree that her decision was not made with a clear mind?"

"No," Michael said firmly. "I remember well when she summoned us and told us about her armour. She was as lucid as you or me."

"Absolute nonsense!" Lord Samuel said, slapping a great big thigh. He gave Michael a sneer, his perfectly groomed moustache rising up to his nose. "Do you really think she would choose you, a baker's boy, over me on such an important mission? It defies all logic and reason."

Michael could always tell when Samuel was getting worked up by his large nostrils, which would start flaring. They were doing so now, reminding Michael of a pig sniffing for food.

"I believe she had a reason for her choice," Michael said, keeping his voice calm. "I think we should trust her."

Lord Samuel hauled himself up with surprising ease and started trooping round the couch.

"I don't believe it," Lord Samuel said. "I can't believe it. Do you realise what sort of responsibility she has entrusted you with? Suktar will return one day, and your bloodline will be responsible for

finding the Guardians and gathering Elizabeth's Armour to stand against him."

"I'm aware of that."

"I don't think you are," Lord Samuel said, shaking his head. "No, it's madness. I cannot accept it."

Michael had to quell his own frustration. "What do you suggest?"

Lord Samuel turned to him and placed both hands on his chest. "Let me take on the burden. I have the resources. My family is large, rich, and powerful. We have the ability to track the Guardians over the centuries, if need be."

Michael saw a sincerity in Samuel's small, brown eyes that wasn't born of selfishness, but genuine concern.

"I'm sorry, Samuel," Michael said. "Queen Elizabeth chose me for a reason. I truly believe that. I will not betray her on this. Those are my final words."

Michael decided against mentioning the real reason he felt the queen chose him – it would only infuriate Samuel further.

"Stubborn boy!" Lord Samuel said, slapping a hand on his thigh. "You risk jeopardising this entire mission with your stupidity."

Michael stood up, his eyes narrowing. "We are done here, I think. Is there anything else you wanted to go over?"

Lord Samuel's hand hovered over his spell-

shooter, and Michael's heart lurched, but he pretended not to notice. Samuel stood very still, staring hard at Michael.

"I will not," Lord Samuel said stiffly. "I cannot allow my family to be led by the family of a baker's boy. It is demeaning, insufferable and it will not be endured."

Michael stared right into Lord Samuel's brown eyes. They looked slightly bloodshot, whether from the drink or simply from his blood boiling, Michael didn't know. What he did know was that Lord Samuel was on the verge of one of his famous outbursts. Michael could remember only too well when Samuel last lost his temper – little of the Diplomacy meeting room was left undamaged.

Eight feet, Michael estimated. Eight feet between them. Could he leap that far and reach Samuel before he drew his spellshooter? Despite his bulk, the man was no slouch, especially with a spellshooter.

Michael inched forwards, pointing his finger at Lord Samuel. "This isn't a game, Samuel. The future of our nation, of the world, is at stake," Michael said. He kept his anger in check, mostly. "I don't want your sense of self-importance getting in the way. You are responsible for the shield. Remember what the queen said? The Guardian of Elizabeth's Shield will be responsible for blocking Suktar's deadly blows, so that the Guardian of Elizabeth's Sword can strike the

killer thrust. That means your family and mine are going to be working together. It might not happen in our lifetimes, it might not happen for centuries, but it *will* happen."

Lord Samuel stared at him, his hand inching closer to his spellshooter. Michael eased forwards a little more and continued talking.

"When it does happen, your descendant had better be a little more accommodating to mine. Do I make myself clear?"

The moment he spoke, he knew he'd gone too far.

Lord Samuel drew his spellshooter so quickly that Michael barely had time to move.

"You've made yourself abundantly clear," Lord Samuel said. "Now, get out of my house."

Michael resisted the urge to duck for cover and held his ground. "Hide the shield well, Samuel."

Samuel's finger twitched on the trigger. "Get out, *now*."

Michael knew he was in danger, but he bit his lip and remained where he was. He was the Head Guardian; he had a responsibility, no matter what Samuel thought.

"The shield," Michael said again, his voice soft. "I need to know that you have a well-thought-out plan for keeping it safe."

To Michael's surprise, Lord Samuel gave a little

smirk. “The shield will be well hidden. It will make finding your sword look hopelessly simplistic.”

Michael knew he wasn't going to get any more from Lord Samuel without risking getting his head blown off.

“We'll be in touch,” Michael said with a little salute.

Michael left, expecting at any moment to feel the soaring heat of a spell smash into his back. To his great relief, it was only curses, not spells, that Lord Samuel let fly as he departed.