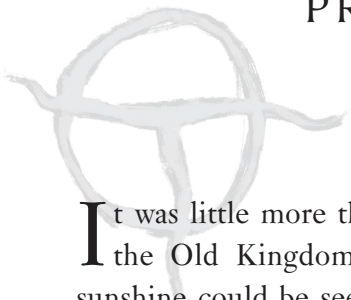


PROLOGUE



It was little more than three miles from the Wall into the Old Kingdom, but that was enough. Noonday sunshine could be seen on the other side of the Wall in Ancelstierre and not a cloud in sight. Here, there was a clouded sunset and a steady rain had just begun to fall, coming faster than the tents could be raised.

The midwife shrugged her cloak higher up against her neck and bent over the woman again, raindrops spilling from her nose on to the upturned face below. The midwife's breath blew out in a cloud of white, but there was no answering billow of air from her patient.

The midwife sighed and slowly straightened up, that single movement telling the watchers everything they needed to know. The woman who had staggered into their forest camp was dead, only holding on to life long enough to pass it on to the baby at her side. But even as the midwife picked up the pathetically small form beside the dead woman, it shuddered within its wrappings and was still.



‘A necromancer?’ said Abhorsen. ‘Only of a sort. I loved the woman who lies here. She would have lived if she had loved another, but she did not. Sabriel is our child. Can you not see the kinship?’

The midwife looked at him as he leant forward and took Sabriel from her, rocking her on his chest. The baby quietened and, in a few seconds, was asleep.

‘Yes,’ said the midwife. ‘I shall come with you and look after Sabriel. But you must find a wet-nurse . . .’

‘And I daresay much else besides,’ mused Abhorsen. ‘But my house is not a place for—’

The Charter Mage cleared his throat and moved around the fire.

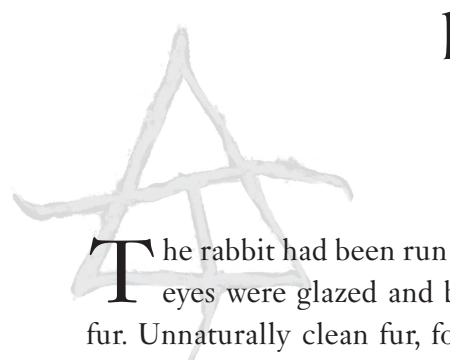
‘If you seek a man who knows a little of the Charter,’ he said hesitantly, ‘I should wish to serve, for I have seen its work in you, lord, though I am loath to leave my fellow wanderers.’

‘Perhaps you will not have to,’ replied Abhorsen, smiling at a sudden thought. ‘I wonder if your leader will object to two new members joining her band. For my work means I must travel and there is no part of the Kingdom that has not felt the imprint of my feet.’

‘Your work?’ asked the man, shivering a little, though it was no longer cold.

‘Yes,’ said Abhorsen. ‘I am a necromancer, but not of the common kind. Where others of the art raise the dead, I lay them back to rest. And those that will not rest, I bind – or try to. I am Abhorsen . . .’

He looked at the baby again and added, almost with a note of surprise, ‘Father of Sabriel.’



The rabbit had been run over minutes before. Its pink eyes were glazed and blood stained its clean white fur. Unnaturally clean fur, for it had just escaped from a bath. It still smelt faintly of lavender water.

A tall, curiously pale young woman stood over the rabbit. Her night-black hair, fashionably bobbed, was hanging slightly over her face. She wore no makeup or jewellery, save for an enamelled school badge pinned to her regulation navy blazer. That, coupled with her long skirt, stockings and sensible shoes, identified her as a schoolgirl. A nameplate under the badge read ‘Sabriel’ and the Roman ‘VI’ and gilt crown proclaimed her to be both a member of the Sixth Form and a prefect.

The rabbit was, unquestionably, dead. Sabriel looked up from it and back along the bricked drive that left the road and curved up to an imposing pair of wrought-iron gates. A sign above the gate, in gilt letters of mock Gothic, announced that they were the gates to Wyverley College.

Smaller letters added that the school was ‘Established in 1652 for Young Ladies of Quality’.

A small figure was busy climbing over the gate, nimbly avoiding the spikes that were supposed to stop such activities. She dropped the last few feet and started running, her pigtails flying, shoes clacking on the bricks. Her head was down to gain momentum, but as cruising speed was established, she looked up, saw Sabriel and the dead rabbit, and screamed.

‘Bunny!’

Sabriel flinched as the girl screamed, hesitated for a moment, then bent down by the rabbit’s side and reached out with one pale hand to touch it between its long ears. Her eyes closed and her face set as if she had suddenly turned to stone. A faint whistling sound came from her slightly parted lips, like the wind heard from far away. Frost formed on her fingertips and rimed the asphalt beneath her feet and knees.

The other girl, running, saw her suddenly tip forward over the rabbit and topple towards the road, but at the last minute her hand came out and she caught herself. A second later, she had regained her balance and was using both hands to restrain the rabbit – a rabbit now inexplicably lively again, its eyes bright and shiny, as eager to be off as when it escaped from its bath.

‘Bunny!’ shrieked the younger girl again, as Sabriel stood up, holding the rabbit by the scruff of its neck. ‘Oh, thank you, Sabriel! When I heard the car skidding I thought . . .’

She faltered as Sabriel handed the rabbit over and blood stained her expectant hands.

‘He’ll be fine, Jacinth,’ Sabriel replied wearily. ‘A scratch. It’s already closed up.’

Jacinth examined Bunny carefully, then looked up at Sabriel, the beginnings of a wriggling fear showing at the back of her eyes.

‘There isn’t anything under the blood,’ stammered Jacinth. ‘What did you . . .’

‘I didn’t,’ snapped Sabriel. ‘But perhaps you can tell me what you are doing out of bounds?’

‘Chasing Bunny,’ replied Jacinth, her eyes clearing as life reverted to a more normal situation. ‘You see . . .’

‘No excuses,’ recited Sabriel. ‘Remember what Mrs Umbrade said at Assembly on Monday.’

‘It’s not an excuse,’ insisted Jacinth. ‘It’s a reason.’

‘You can explain it to Mrs Umbrade then.’

‘Oh, Sabriel! You wouldn’t! You know I was only chasing Bunny. I’d never have come out—’

Sabriel held up her hands in mock defeat and gestured back to the gates.

‘If you’re back inside within three minutes, I won’t have seen you. And open the gate this time. They won’t be locked till I go back inside.’

Jacinth smiled, her whole face beaming, whirled around and sped back up the drive, Bunny clutched against her neck. Sabriel watched till she had gone through the gate, then let the tremors take her till she was bent over, shaking with cold. A moment of weakness and she had broken the promise she had made both to herself and her father. It was only a rabbit and Jacinth did love it so much – but what would that lead to? It

**PERIMETER COMMAND
NORTHERN ARMY GROUP**

**Unauthorised egress from the Perimeter Zone
is strictly forbidden.**

**Anyone attempting to cross the Perimeter Zone
will be shot without warning.**

**Authorised travellers must report to the
Perimeter Command HQ.**

REMEMBER – NO WARNING WILL BE MADE

Sabriel read the note with interest and felt a quickening sense of excitement start within her. Her memories of the Old Kingdom were dim, from the perspective of a child, but she felt a sense of mystery and wonder kindle with the force of the Charter Magic she felt around her – a sense of something so much more alive than the bitumened parade ground, and the scarlet warning sign. And much more freedom than Wyverley College.

But that feeling of wonder and excitement came laced with a dread that she couldn't shake, a dread made up of fear for what might be happening to her father . . . what might have already happened . . .

The arrow on the sign indicating where authorised travellers should go seemed to point in the direction of a bitumen parade ground, lined with white-painted rocks, and a number of unprepossessing wooden buildings. Other than that, there were simply the beginnings of the communication trenches that sank into the ground and

then zigzagged their way to the double line of trenches, blockhouses and fortifications that confronted the Wall.

Sabriel studied them for a while, and saw the flash of colour as several soldiers hopped out of one trench and went forward to the wire. They seemed to be carrying spears rather than rifles and she wondered why the Perimeter was built for modern war, but manned by people expecting something rather more medieval. Then she remembered a conversation with her father and his comment that the Perimeter had been designed far away in the South, where they refused to admit that this Perimeter was different from any other contested border. Up until a century or so ago, there had also been a wall on the Ancelstierre side. A lowish wall, made of rammed earth and peat, but a successful one.

Recalling that conversation, her eyes made out a low rise of scarred earth in the middle of the desolation of wire and she realised that was where the southern wall had been. Peering at it, she also realised that what she had taken to be loose pickets between lines of concertina wire were something different – tall constructs more like the trunks of small trees stripped of every branch. They seemed familiar to her, but she couldn't place what they were.

Sabriel was still staring at them, thinking, when a loud and not very pleasant voice erupted a little way behind her right ear.

'What do you think you're doing, miss? You can't loiter about here. On the bus or up to the Tower!'

Sabriel winced and turned as quickly as she could, skis

