



## prologue

Fog rose from the river, great billows of white weaving into the soot and smoke of the city of Corvere, to become the hybrid thing that the more popular newspapers called smog and *The Times* "miasmatic fog". Cold, dank and foul-smelling, it was dangerous by any name. At its thickest, it could smother, and it could transform the faintest hint of a cough into pneumonia.

But the unhealthiness of the fog was not its chief danger. That came from its other primary feature. The Corvere fog was a concealer, a veil that shrouded the city's vaunted gaslights and confused both eyes and ears. When the fog lay on the city, all streets were dark, all echoes strange, and everywhere set for murder and mayhem.

"The fog shows no signs of lifting," reported Damed, principal bodyguard to King Touchstone. His voice showed his dislike of the fog even though he knew it was only a natural phenomenon, a blend of industrial pollution and river mist. Back in their home, the Old Kingdom, such fogs were often created by Free Magic sorcerers. "Also, the... telephone... is not

working, and the escort is both understrength and new. There is not one of the officers we usually have among them. I don't think you should go, sire."

Touchstone was standing by the window, peering out through the shutters. They'd had to shutter all the windows some days ago, when some of the crowd outside had adopted slingshots. Before that, the demonstrators hadn't been able to throw half bricks far enough, as the mansion that housed the Old Kingdom Embassy was set in a walled park and a good fifty yards back from the street.

Not for the first time, Touchstone wished that he could reach the Charter and draw upon it for strength and magical assistance. But they were five hundred miles south of the Wall, and the air was still and cold. Only when the wind blew very strongly from the north could he feel even the slightest touch of his magical heritage.

Sabriel felt the lack of the Charter even more, Touchstone knew. He glanced at his wife. She was at her desk, as usual, writing one last letter to an old school friend, a prominent businessman, or a member of the Ancelstierre Moot. Promising gold, or support, or introductions, or perhaps making thinly veiled threats of what would happen if they were stupid enough to support Corolini's attempts to settle hundreds of thousands of Southerling refugees over the Wall, in the Old Kingdom.

Touchstone still found it odd to see Sabriel dressed in Ancelstierran clothes, particularly their court clothes, as she was wearing today. She should be in her blue and silver tabard, with the bells of the Abhorsen across her chest, her sword at her

side. Not in a silver dress with a hussar's pelisse worn on one shoulder and a strange little pillbox hat pinned to her deep-black hair. And the small automatic pistol in her silver mesh purse was no substitute for a sword.

Not that Touchstone felt at ease in his clothes either. An Ancelstierran shirt with its stiff collar and tie was too constricting, and his suit offered no protection at all. A sharp blade would slide through the double-breasted coat of superfine wool as easily as it would through butter, and as for a bullet...

"Shall I convey your regrets, sire?" asked Damed.

Touchstone frowned and looked at Sabriel. She had been to school in Ancelstierre, she understood the people and their ruling classes far better than he did. She led their diplomatic efforts south of the Wall, as she had always done.

"No," said Sabriel. She stood up and sealed the last letter with a sharp tap. "The Moot sits tonight, and it is possible Corolini will present his Forced Emigration Bill. Dawforth's bloc may just give us the votes to defeat the motion. We must attend his garden party."

"In this fog?" asked Touchstone. "How can he have a garden party?"

"They will ignore the weather," said Sabriel. "We will all stand around, drinking green absinthe and eating carrots cut into elegant shapes, and pretend we're having a marvellous time."

"Carrots?"

"A fad of Dawforth's, introduced by his swami," replied Sabriel. "According to Sulyn."

"She would know," said Touchstone, making a face – but at the prospect of raw carrots and green absinthe, not Sulyn. She

was one of the old school friends who had been so much help to them. Sulyn, like the others at Wyverley College twenty years ago, had seen what happened when Free Magic was stirred up and grew strong enough to cross the Wall and run amok in Ancelstierre.

"We will go, Damed," said Sabriel. "But it would be sensible to put in place the plan we discussed."

"I do beg your pardon, Milady Abhorsen," replied Damed, "but I'm not sure that it will increase your safety. In fact, it may make matters worse."

"But it will be more fun," pronounced Sabriel. "Are the cars ready? I shall just put on my coat and some boots."

Damed nodded reluctantly and left the room. Touchstone picked out a dark overcoat from a number that were draped across the back of a chaise longue and shrugged it on. Sabriel put on another – a man's coat – and sat down to exchange her shoes for boots.

"Damed isn't concerned without reason," Touchstone said as he offered his hand to Sabriel. "And the fog is very thick. If we were at home, I wouldn't doubt it was made with malice aforethought"

"The fog is natural enough," replied Sabriel. They stood close together and knotted each others' scarves, finishing with a soft, brushing kiss. "But I agree it may well be used against us. Yet I am so close to forming an alliance against Corolini. If Dawforth comes in, and the Sayres stay out of the matter—"

"Little chance of that unless we can show them we haven't made off with their precious son and nephew," growled Touchstone, but his attention was on his pistols. He checked

both were loaded and there was a round in the chamber, hammer down and safety on. "I wish we knew more about this guide Nicholas hired. I am sure I have heard the name Hedge before, and not in any positive light. If only we'd met them on the Great South Road."

"I am sure we will hear from Ellimere soon," said Sabriel as she checked her own pistol. "Or perhaps even from Sam. We must leave that matter, at least, to the good sense of our children and deal with what is before us."

Touchstone grimaced at the notion of his children's good sense, handed Sabriel a grey felt hat with a black band, twin to his own, and helped her remove the pillbox and pin her hair up underneath the replacement.

"Ready?" he asked as she belted her coat. With their hats on, collars up and scarves wound high, they looked indistinguishable from Damed and their other guards. Which was precisely the idea.

There were ten bodyguards waiting outside, not including the drivers of the two heavily armoured Hedden-Hare automobiles. Sabriel and Touchstone joined them, and the twelve huddled together for a moment. If any enemies were watching beyond the walls, they would be hard put to make out who was who through the fog.

Two people went into the back of each car, with the remaining eight standing on the running boards. The drivers had kept the engines idling for some time, the exhausts sending a steady stream of warm, lighter emissions into the fog.

At a signal from Damed, the cars started down the drive, sounding their Klaxons. This was the signal for the guards at the

gate to throw it open, and for the Ancelstierran police outside to push the crowd apart. There was always a crowd these days, mostly made up of Corolini's supporters: paid thugs and agitators wearing the red armbands of Corolini's Our Country party.

Despite Damed's worries, the police did their job well, separating the throng so that the two cars could speed through. A few bricks and stones were hurled after them, but they missed the riding guards or bounced off the hardened glass and armour plate. Within a minute, the crowd was left behind, just a dark, shouting mass in the fog.

"The escort is not following," said Damed, who was riding the running board next to the front car's driver. A detachment of mounted police had been assigned to accompany King Touchstone and his Abhorsen Queen wherever they went in the city, and up to now they had performed their duty to the expected standards of the Corvere Police Corps. This time the troopers were still standing by their horses.

"Maybe they got their orders mixed up," said the driver through her open quarter window. But there was no conviction in her voice.

"We'd better change the route," ordered Damed. "Take Harald Street. Left up ahead."

The cars sped past two slower automobiles, a heavily laden truck and a horse and wagon, braked sharply, and curved left into the broad stretch of Harald Street. This was one of the more modern promenades and better lit, with gas lamps on both sides of the street at regular intervals. Even so, the fog made it unsafe to drive faster than fifteen miles per hour.

"Something up ahead!" reported the driver. Damed looked

up and swore. As their headlights pierced the fog, he saw a great mass of people blocking the street. He couldn't make out what was on the banners they held, but it was easy enough to recognise it as an Our Country demonstration. To make it worse, there were no police to keep them in check. Not one blue-helmeted officer in sight.

"Stop! Back up!" said Damed. He waved at the car behind, a double signal that meant "Trouble!" and "Retreat!"

Both cars started to back up. As they did, the crowd ahead surged forward. They'd been silent till then. Now they started shouting, "Foreigners out!" and "Our Country!" The shouts were accompanied by bricks and stones, which for the moment fell short.

"Back up!" shouted Damed again. He drew his pistol, holding it down by his leg. "Faster!"

The rear car was almost back at the corner when the truck and the wagon they'd passed pulled across, blocking the way. Masked men dropped out of the backs of both vehicles, sending the fog shivering as they ran. Men with guns.

Damed knew even before he saw the guns that this was what he had feared all along.

An ambush.

"Out! Out!" he shouted, pointing at the armed men. "Shoot!"

Around him the other guards were opening car doors for cover. A second later they opened fire, the deeper boom of their pistols accompanied by the sharp tap-tap-tap of the new, compact machine rifles that were so much handier than the Army's old Lewins. None of the guards liked guns, but they had practised with them constantly since coming south of the Wall.

"Not the crowd!" roared Touchstone. "Only armed targets!"

Their attackers were not so careful. They had gone under their vehicles, behind a postbox and down on the footpath beside a low wall of flower boxes, and were firing wildly.

Bullets ricocheted off the street and the armoured cars in mad, zinging screeches. There was noise everywhere, harsh, confused sound, a mixture of screaming and shouting combined with the constant crack and chatter of gunfire. The crowd, so eager to rush forward only seconds before, had become a terrible, tumbling crush of people trying to flee.

Damed rushed to a knot of guards crouched behind the engine of the rear car.

"The river," he shouted. "Go through the square and down the Warden Steps. We have two boats there. You'll lose any pursuit in the fog"

"We can fight our way back to the Embassy!" retorted Touchstone.

"This is too well planned! The police have turned, or enough of them! You must get out of Corvere. Out of Ancelstierre!"

"No!" shouted Sabriel. "We haven't finished—"

She was cut off as Damed violently pushed her and Touchstone over and leapt above them. With his legendary quickness, he intercepted a large black cylinder that was tumbling through the air, trailing smoke behind it.

A bomb.

Damed caught and threw it in one swift motion, but even he was not fast enough.

The bomb exploded while it was still in the air. Packed with high explosive and pieces of metal, it killed Damed instantly.

The blast broke every window for half a mile and momentarily deafened and blinded everyone within a hundred yards. But it was the thousands of metal fragments that did the real damage, ripping and screaming through the air, to bounce off stone or metal, or all too often to cut through flesh.

Silence followed the explosion, save for the roar of the burning gas from the shattered lamps. Even the fog had been thrown back by the force of the blast, which had cleared a great circle open to the sky. Rays of weak sunshine filtered through, to illuminate a scene of terrible destruction.

There were bodies strewn all around and under the cars, not one overcoated guard still on his or her feet. Even the cars' armoured windows were broken and the occupants were slumped in death.

The surviving assassins waited for a few minutes before they crawled out from behind the low wall and moved forward, laughing and congratulating one another, their weapons cradled casually under their arms or across their shoulders with what they imagined was debonair style.

The talk and laughter were too loud, but they didn't notice. Their senses were battered, their minds in shock. Not only from the explosion or the terrible sights that drew closer and more real with every step, or even with relief at being alive in the midst of so much death and destruction.

The real shock came from the realisation that it was three hundred years since a king and a queen had been slain on the streets of Corvere. Now it had happened again – and they had done the deed.