

SABRIEL




ALLEN & UNWIN

to my family and friends

This edition published in 2006

First published in 1995 by HarperCollins Publishers, Australia

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Allen & Unwin
83 Alexander St
Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
Web: www.allenandunwin.com

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Nix, Garth, 1963- .
Sabriel.
ISBN 9781741750188 (pbk).
ISBN 1 74175 018 0 (pbk).
I. Title. (Series : Old Kingdom trilogy ; bk. 1).
A823.3

Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1





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.

"The child, too?" asked one of the watchers, a man who wore the mark of the Charter fresh-drawn in wood ash upon his brow. "Then there shall be no need for baptism."

His hand went up to brush the mark from his forehead then suddenly stopped, as a pale, white hand gripped his and forced it down in a single, swift motion.

"Peace!" said a calm voice. "I wish you no harm."

The white hand released its grip and the speaker stepped into the ring of firelight. The others watched him without welcome and the hands that had half sketched Charter marks, or gone to bowstrings and hilts, did not relax.

The man strode towards the bodies and looked upon them. Then he turned to face the watchers, pushing his hood back to reveal the face of someone who had taken paths far from sunlight, for his skin was a deathly white.

"I am called Abhorsen," he said and his words sent ripples through the people about him, as if he had cast a large and weighty stone into a pool of stagnant water. "And there will be a baptism tonight."

The Charter Mage looked down on the bundle in the midwife's hands and said: "The child is dead, Abhorsen. We are travellers, our life lived under the sky, and it is often harsh. We know death, lord."

"Not as I do," replied Abhorsen, smiling so his paper-white face crinkled at the corners and drew back from his equally white teeth. "And I say the child is not yet dead."

The man tried to meet Abhorsen's gaze, but faltered and looked away at his fellows. None moved, or made any sign, till

a woman said, "So. It is easily done. Sign the child, Arrenil. We will make a new camp at Leovi's Ford. Join us when you are finished here."

The Charter Mage inclined his head in assent and the others drifted away to pack up their half-made camp, slow with the reluctance of having to move, but filled with a greater reluctance to remain near Abhorsen, for his name was one of secrets and unspoken fears.

When the midwife went to lay the child down and leave, Abhorsen spoke: "Wait. You will be needed."

The midwife looked down on the baby and saw that it was a girl child and, save for its stillness, could be merely sleeping. She had heard of Abhorsen, and if the girl could live... warily she picked up the child again and held her out to the Charter Mage.

"If the Charter does not—" began the man, but Abhorsen held up a pallid hand and interrupted.

"Let us see what the Charter wills."

The man looked at the child again and sighed. Then he took a small bottle from his pouch and held it aloft, crying out a chant that was the beginning of a Charter; one that listed all things that lived or grew, or once lived, or would live again, and the bonds that held them all together. As he spoke, a light came to the bottle, pulsing with the rhythm of the chant. Then the chanter was silent. He touched the bottle to the earth, then to the sign of wood ash on his forehead, and then upended it over the child.

A great flash lit the surrounding woods as the glowing liquid splashed over the child's head, and the priest cried: "By the Charter that binds all things, we name thee—"

Normally, the parents of the child would then speak the name. Here, only Abhorsen spoke and he said: "Sabriel."

As he uttered the word, the wood ash disappeared from the priest's forehead and slowly formed on the child's. The Charter had accepted the baptism.

"But... but she is dead!" exclaimed the Charter Mage, gingerly touching his forehead to make sure the ash was truly gone.

He got no answer, for the midwife was staring across the fire at Abhorsen, and Abhorsen was staring at – nothing. His eyes reflected the dancing flames, but did not see them.

Slowly, a chill mist began to rise from his body, spreading towards the man and midwife, who scuttled to the other side of the fire – wanting to get away, but now too afraid to run.

He could hear the child crying, which was good. If she had gone beyond the first gateway he could not bring her back without more stringent preparations and a subsequent dilution of her spirit.

The current was strong, but he knew this branch of the river and waded past pools and eddies that hoped to drag him under. Already, he could feel the waters leeching his spirit, but his will was strong, so they took only the colour, not the substance.

He paused to listen and, hearing the crying diminish, hastened forward. Perhaps she was already at the gateway and about to pass.

The First Gate was a veil of mist, with a single dark opening, where the river poured into the silence beyond. Abhorsen hurried towards it and then stopped. The baby had not yet

passed through, but only because something had caught her and picked her up. Standing there, looming up out of the black waters, was a shadow darker than the gate.

It was several feet higher than Abhorsen and there were pale marsh-lights burning where you would expect to see eyes, and the fetid stench of carrion rolled off it – a warm stench that relieved the chill of the river.

Abhorsen advanced on the thing slowly, watching the child it held loosely in the crook of a shadowed arm. The baby was asleep, but restless, and it squirmed towards the creature, seeking a mother's breast, but it only held her away from itself, as if the child were hot or caustic.

Slowly, Abhorsen drew a small, silver handbell from the bandoleer of bells across his chest and cocked his wrist to ring it. But the shadow-thing held the baby up and spoke in a dry, slithery voice, like a snake on gravel.

"Spirit of your spirit, Abhorsen. You can't spell me while I hold her. And perhaps I shall take her beyond the gate, as her mother has already gone."

Abhorsen frowned, in recognition, and replaced the bell. "You have a new shape, Kerrigor. And you are now this side of the First Gate. Who was foolish enough to assist you so far?"

Kerrigor smiled widely and Abhorsen caught a glimpse of fires burning deep inside his mouth.

"One of the usual calling," he croaked. "But unskilled. He didn't realise it would be in the nature of an exchange. Alas, his life was not sufficient for me to pass the last portal. But now, you have come to help me."

"I, who chained you beyond the Seventh Gate?"

"Yes," whispered Kerrigor. "The irony, does not, I think, escape you. But if you want the child..."

He made as if to throw the baby into the stream and, with that jerk, woke her. Immediately, she began to cry and her little fists reached out to gather up the shadow-stuff of Kerrigor like the folds of a robe. He cried out, tried to detach her, but the tiny hands held tightly and he was forced to over-use his strength, and threw her from him. She landed, squalling, and was instantly caught up in the flow of the river, but Abhorsen lunged forward, snatching her from both the river and Kerrigor's grasping hands.

Stepping back, he drew the silver bell one-handed and swung it so it sounded twice. The sound was curiously muffled, but true, and the clear chime hung in the air, fresh and cutting, alive. Kerrigor flinched at the sound and fell backwards to the darkness that was the gate.

"Some fool will soon bring me back and then..." he cried out, as the river took him under. The waters swirled and gurgled and then resumed their steady flow.

Abhorsen stared at the gate for a time, then sighed and, placing the bell back in his belt, looked at the baby held in his arm. She stared back at him, dark eyes matching his own. Already, the colour had been drained from her skin. Nervously, Abhorsen laid a hand across the brand on her forehead and felt the glow of her spirit within. The Charter mark had kept her life contained when the river should have drained it. It was her life-spirit that had so burned Kerrigor.

She smiled up at him and gurgled a little, and Abhorsen felt a smile tilting the corner of his own mouth. Still smiling, he turned and began the long wade back up the river, to the gate that would return them both to their living flesh.

The baby wailed a scant second before Abhorsen opened his eyes, so that the midwife was already halfway around the dying fire, ready to pick her up. Frost crackled on the ground and icicles hung from Abhorsen's nose. He wiped them off with a sleeve and leaned over the child, much as any anxious father does after a birth.

"How is the babe?" he asked and the midwife stared at him wonderingly, for the dead child was now loudly alive and as deathly white as he.

"As you hear, lord," she answered. "She is very well. It is perhaps a little cold for her—"

He gestured at the fire and spoke a word, and it roared into life, the frost melting at once, the raindrops sizzling into steam.

"That will do till morning," said Abhorsen. "Then I shall take her to my house. I shall have need of a nurse. Will you come?"

The midwife hesitated and looked to the Charter Mage, who still lingered on the far side of the fire. He refused to meet her glance and she looked down once more at the little girl bawling in her arms.

"You are... you are..." whispered the midwife.

"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!"



chapter one

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 pigtailed 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 was no great step from bringing back a rabbit to bringing back a person.

Worse, it had been so easy. She had caught the spirit right at the wellspring of the river and had returned it with barely a gesture of power, patching the body with simple Charter symbols as they stepped from death to life. She hadn't even needed bells or the other apparatus of a necromancer. Only a whistle and her will.

Death and what came after death was no great mystery to Sabriel. She just wished it was.

It was Sabriel's last term at Wyverley – the last three weeks, in fact. She had graduated already, coming first in English, equal first in Music, third in Mathematics, seventh in Science, second in Fighting Arts and fourth in Etiquette. She had also been a runaway first in Magic, but that wasn't printed on the certificate. Magic only worked in those regions of Ancelstierre close to the Wall which marked the border with the Old Kingdom. Farther away, it was considered to be quite beyond the pale, if it existed at all, and persons of repute did not mention it. Wyverley College was only forty miles from the Wall, had a good all-round reputation, and taught Magic to those students who could obtain special permission from their parents.

Sabriel's father had chosen it for that reason when he had emerged from the Old Kingdom with a five-year-old girl in tow to seek a boarding school. He had paid in advance for that first year, in Old Kingdom silver deniers that stood up to surreptitious touches with cold iron. Thereafter, he had come to visit his daughter twice a year, at Midsummer and Midwinter,

staying for several days on each occasion and always bringing more silver.

Understandably, the Headmistress was very fond of Sabriel. Particularly since she never seemed troubled by her father's rare visitations, as most other girls would be. Once Mrs Umbrade had asked Sabriel if she minded and had been troubled by the answer that Sabriel saw her father far more often than when he was actually there. Mrs Umbrade didn't teach Magic and didn't want to know any more about it other than the pleasant fact that some parents would pay considerable sums to have their daughters schooled in the basics of sorcery and enchantment.

Mrs Umbrade certainly didn't want to know how Sabriel saw her father. Sabriel, on the other hand, always looked forward to his unofficial visits and watched the moon, tracing its movements from the leather-bound almanac which listed the phases of the moon in both Kingdoms and gave valuable insights into the seasons, tides and other ephemerae that were never the same at any one time on both sides of the Wall. Abhorsen's sending of himself always appeared at dark of the moon.

On these nights, Sabriel would lock herself into her study (a privilege of the Sixth Form – previously she'd had to sneak into the library), put the kettle on the fire, drink tea and read a book until the characteristic wind rose up, extinguished the fire, put out the electric light and rattled the shutters – all necessary preparations, it seemed, for her father's phosphorescent sending to appear in the spare armchair.

Sabriel was particularly looking forward to her father's visit that November. It would be his last, because college was about to end and she wanted to discuss her future. Mrs Umbrade wanted her to go to university, but that meant moving further away from the Old Kingdom. Her magic would wane and parental visitations would be limited to actual physical appearances, and those might well become even less frequent. On the other hand, going to university would mean staying with some of the friends she'd had virtually all her life, girls she'd started school with at the age of five. There would also be a much greater world of social interaction, particularly with young men, of which commodity there was a distinct shortage around Wyverley College.

And the disadvantage of losing her magic could possibly be offset by a lessening of her affinity for death and the dead...

Sabriel was thinking of this as she waited, book in hand, half-drunk cup of tea balanced precariously on the arm of her chair. It was almost midnight and Abhorsen hadn't appeared. Sabriel had checked the almanac twice and had even opened the shutters to peer out through the glass at the sky. It was definitely dark of the moon, but there was no sign of him. It was the first time in her life that he hadn't appeared and she felt suddenly uneasy.

Sabriel rarely thought about what life was really like in the Old Kingdom, but now old stories came to mind and dim memories of when she'd lived there with the Travellers. Abhorsen was a powerful sorcerer, but even then...

"Sabriel! Sabriel!"

A high-pitched voice interrupted her thought, quickly followed by a hasty knock and a rattle of the doorknob. Sabriel sighed, pushed herself out of her chair, caught the teacup and unlocked the door.

A young girl stood on the other side, twisting her nightcap from side to side in trembling hands, her face white with fear.

"Olwyn!" exclaimed Sabriel. "What is it? Is Sussen sick again?"

"No," sobbed the girl. "I heard noises behind the tower door and I thought it was Rebeca and Ila having a midnight feast without me, so I looked..."

"What!" exclaimed Sabriel, alarmed. No one opened outside doors in the middle of the night, not this close to the Old Kingdom.

"I'm sorry," cried Olwyn. "I didn't mean to. I don't know why I did. It wasn't Rebeca and Ila – it was a black shape and it tried to get in. I slammed the door..."

Sabriel threw the teacup aside and pushed past Olwyn. She was already halfway down the corridor before she heard the porcelain smash behind her and Olwyn's horrified gasp at such cavalier treatment of good china. She ignored it and broke into a run, slapping on the light switches as she ran towards the open door of the west dormitory. As she reached it, screams broke out inside, rapidly crescendoing to an hysterical chorus. There were forty girls in the dormitory – most of the First Form, all under the age of eleven. Sabriel took a deep breath and stepped into the doorway, fingers crooked in a spell-casting stance. Even before she looked, she felt the presence of death.

The dormitory was very long and narrow, with a low roof and small windows. Beds and dressers lined each side. At the far end, a door led to the West Tower steps. It was supposed to be locked inside and out, but locks rarely prevailed against the powers of the Old Kingdom.

The door was open. An intensely dark shape stood there, as if someone had cut a man-shaped figure out of the night, carefully choosing a piece devoid of stars. It had no features at all, but the head quivered from side to side, as if whatever senses it did possess worked in a narrow range. Curiously, it carried an absolutely mundane sack in one four-fingered hand, the rough-woven cloth in stark contrast to its own surreal flesh.

Sabriel's hands moved in a complicated gesture, drawing the symbols of the Charter that intimated sleep, quiet and rest. With a flourish, she indicated both sides of the dormitory and drew one of the master symbols, drawing all together. Instantly, every girl in the room stopped screaming and slowly subsided back on to her bed.

The creature's head stopped moving and Sabriel knew its attention was now centred on her. Slowly it moved, lifting one clumsy leg and swinging it forward, resting for a moment, then swinging the other a little past the first. A lumbering, rolling motion, that made an eerie, shuffling noise on the thin carpet. As it passed each bed, the electric lights above them flared once and went out.

Sabriel let her hands fall to her side and focused her eyes on the centre of the creature's torso, feeling the stuff of which it was made. She had come without any of her instruments or tools, but

that led to only a moment's hesitation before she let herself slip over the border into Death, her eyes still on the intruder.

The river flowed around her legs, cold as always. The light, grey and without warmth, still stretched to an entirely flat horizon. In the distance, she could hear the roar of the First Gate. She could see the creature's true shape clearly now, not wrapped in the aura of death which it carried to the living world. It was an Old Kingdom denizen, vaguely humanoid, but more like an ape than a man and obviously only semi-intelligent. But there was more to it than that, and Sabriel felt the clutch of fear as she saw the black thread that came from the creature's back and ran into the river. Somewhere, beyond the First Gate, or even further, that umbilical rested in the hands of an Adept. As long as the thread existed the creature would be totally under the control of its master, who could use its senses and spirit as it saw fit.

Something tugged at Sabriel's physical body and she reluctantly twitched her senses back to the living world, a slight feeling of nausea rising in her as a wave of warmth rushed over her death-chilled body.

"What is it?" said a calm voice, close to Sabriel's ear. An old voice, tinged with the power of Charter Magic – Miss Greenwood, the Magistrix of the school.

"It's a Dead servant – a spirit form," replied Sabriel, her attention back on the creature. It was halfway down the dorm, still single-mindedly rolling one leg after the other. "Without free will. Something sent it back to the living world. It's controlled from beyond the First Gate."

"Why is it here?" asked the Magistrix. Her voice sounded calm, but Sabriel felt the Charter symbols gathering in her voice, forming on her tongue – symbols that would unleash lightning and flame, the destructive powers of the earth.

"It's not obviously malign, nor has it attempted any actual harm..." replied Sabriel slowly, her mind working over the possibilities. She was used to explaining purely necromantic aspects of magic to Miss Greenwood. The Magistrix had taught her Charter Magic, but necromancy was definitely not on the syllabus. Sabriel had learned more than she wanted to know about necromancy from her father... and the Dead themselves. "Don't do anything for a moment. I will attempt to speak with it"

The cold washed over her again, biting into her, as the river gushed around her legs, eager to pull her over and carry her away. Sabriel exerted her will and the cold became simply a sensation, without danger, the current merely a pleasing vibration about the feet.

The creature was close now, as it was in the living world. Sabriel held out both her hands and clapped, the sharp sound echoing for longer than it would anywhere else. Before the echo died, Sabriel whistled several notes and they echoed too, sweet sounds within the harshness of the handclap.

The thing flinched at the sound and stepped back, putting both hands to its ears. As it did so, it dropped the sack. Sabriel started in surprise. She hadn't noticed the sack before, possibly because she hadn't expected it to be there. Very few inanimate things existed in both realms, the living and the dead.

She was even more surprised as the creature suddenly bent forward and plunged into the water, hands searching for the sack. It found it almost at once, but not without losing its footing. As the sack surfaced, the current forced the creature under. Sabriel breathed a sigh of relief as she saw it slide away, then gasped as its head broke the surface and it cried out: "Sabriel! My messenger! Take the sack!" The voice was Abhorsen's.

Sabriel ran forward and an arm pushed out towards her, the neck of the sack clutched in its fingers. She reached out, missed, then tried again. The sack was secure in her grasp, as the current took the creature completely under. Sabriel looked after it, hearing the roar of the First Gate suddenly increase as it always did when someone passed its falls. She turned and started to slog back against the current to a point where she could easily return to life. The sack in her hand was heavy and there was a leaden feeling in her stomach. If the messenger was truly Abhorsen's, then he himself was unable to return to the realm of the living.

And that meant he was either dead or trapped by something that should have passed beyond the Final Gate.

Once again, a wave of nausea overcame her and Sabriel fell to her knees, shaking. She could feel the Magistrix's hand on her shoulder, but her attention was fastened on the sack she held in her hand. She didn't need to look to know that the creature was gone. Its manifestation into the living world had ceased as its spirit had gone past the First Gate. Only a pile of grave mould would remain, to be swept aside in the morning.

"What did you do?" asked the Magistrix, as Sabriel brushed her hands through her hair, ice crystals falling from her hands on to the sack that lay in front of her knees.

"It had a message for me," replied Sabriel. "So I took it."

She opened the sack and reached inside. A sword hilt met her grasp, so she drew it out, still scabbarded, and put it to one side. She didn't need to draw it to see the Charter symbols etched along its blade – the dull emerald in the pommel and the worn bronze-plated cross-guard were as familiar to her as the school's uninspired cutlery. It was Abhorsen's sword.

The leather bandoleer she drew out next was an old brown belt, a hands-breadth wide, which always smelled faintly of beeswax. Seven tubular leather pouches hung from it, starting with one the size of a small pill bottle; growing larger, till the seventh was almost the size of a jar. The bandoleer was designed to be worn across the chest, with the pouches hanging down. Sabriel opened the smallest and pulled out a tiny silver bell, with a dark, deeply-polished mahogany handle. She held it gently, but the clapper still swung slightly and the bell made a high, sweet note that somehow lingered in the mind, even after the sound was gone.

"Father's instruments," whispered Sabriel. "The tools of a necromancer."

"But there are Charter marks engraved on the bell... and the handle!" interjected the Magistrix, who was looking down with fascination. "Necromancy is Free Magic, not governed by the Charter..."

"Father's was different," replied Sabriel distantly, still staring

at the bell she held in her hand, thinking of her father's brown, lined hands holding the bells. "Binding, not raising. He was a faithful servant of the Charter."

"You're going to be leaving us, aren't you?" the Magistrix said suddenly, as Sabriel replaced the bell and stood up, sword in one hand, bandoleer in the other. "I just saw it, in the reflection of the bell. You were crossing the Wall..."

"Yes. Into the Old Kingdom," said Sabriel, with sudden realisation. "Something has happened to Father... but I'll find him... so I swear by the Charter I bear."

She touched the Charter mark on her forehead, which glowed briefly and then faded so that it might never have been. The Magistrix nodded and touched a hand to her own forehead, where a glowing mark suddenly obscured all the patterns of time. As it faded, rustling noises and faint whimpers began to sound along both sides of the dormitory.

"I'll shut the door and explain to the girls," the Magistrix said firmly. "You'd better go and... prepare for tomorrow."

Sabriel nodded and left, trying to fix her mind on the practicalities of the journey, rather than on what could have happened to her father. She would take a cab as early as possible into Bain, the nearest town, and then a bus to the Ancelstierre Perimeter that faced the Wall. With luck, she would be there by early afternoon...

Behind these plans, her thoughts kept jumping back to Abhorsen. What could have happened to trap him in Death? And what could she really hope to do about it, even if she did get to the Old Kingdom?