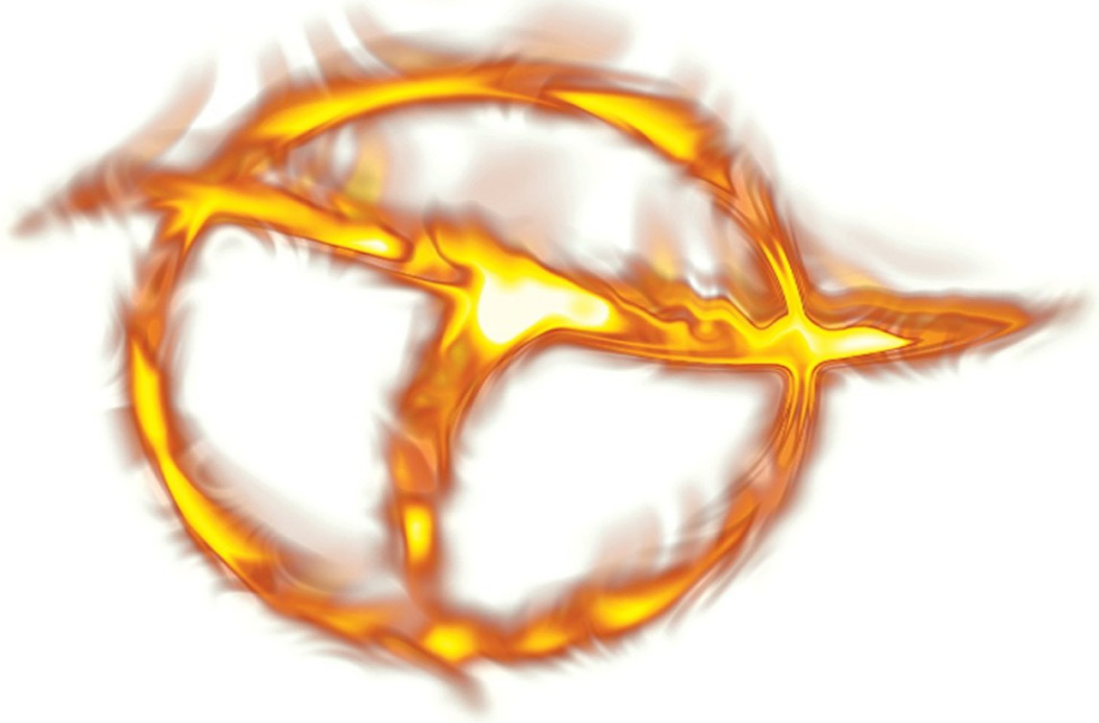


New York Times Bestselling Author

SABRIEL



GARTH
NIX



ONE WARRIOR TO CHALLENGE THE DEAD



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MS Reader edition v 1. May 2001 ISBN 0-06-000548-3

Print edition first published in 1995 HarperCollins Publishers

Set from rack size edition: 0-06-447183-7

to my family and friends

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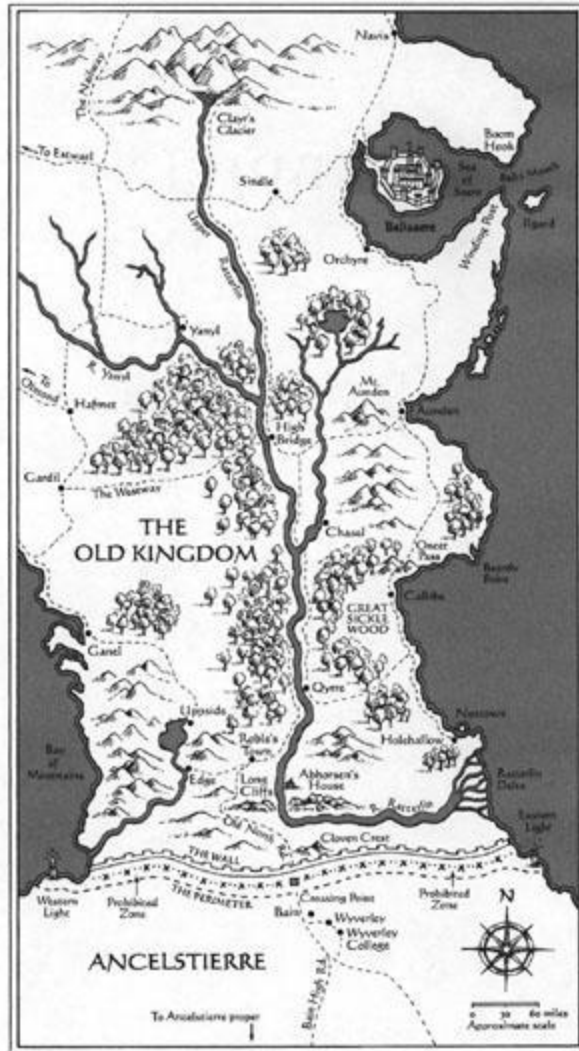
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Prologue

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 onto 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 travelers, 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 leaching his spirit, but his will was strong, so they took only the color, 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