

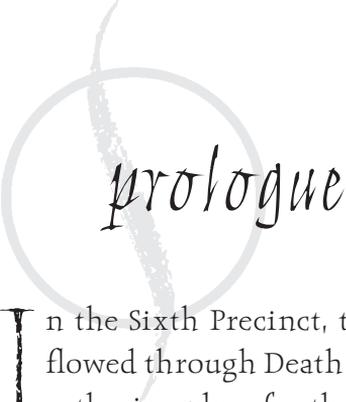
THE EXCITING FIFTH BOOK IN THE BESTSELLING OLD KINGDOM SERIES

# GARTH NIX



# Goldenhand

FOR EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING, THERE IS A TIME TO DIE



## prologue

In the Sixth Precinct, the inexorable current of the river that flowed through Death slowed almost to a stop. It was a natural gathering place for the Dead who hoped to go no further, and for those who strived to claw their way back through five gates and precincts and out into the living world again.

Amid the myriad Dead who waited, and hungered, and fought against the compulsion to go deeper into Death, there were two *living* people. Necromancers, of course, for no others could be here while still alive. At least alive for the moment, for unwary necromancers going deeper into Death than their knowledge and their strength allowed were the particular prey of the Greater Dead who prowled the precinct, ever eager to consume any scrap of Life that would aid them in their desperate desire to live again.

But in this case the Greater Dead stayed well away, knowing the two women were most uncommon necromancers. Both wore bandoliers containing the seven bells, necromantic tools of power infused with Free Magic, but their bells had mahogany handles rather than ebony, and the silver bell-metal crawled with bright Charter marks.

That alone declared their identity, but it was confirmed by their apparel: armoured coats made from many overlapping

plates of a material called gethre, with surcoats over the armour. One wore deep blue, sprinkled with many silver keys, the other a coat also with silver keys upon the blue, but quartered with golden stars on a field of green.

The silver keys were the blazon of the Abhorsen, foe and nemesis of all things Dead, and this was the Abhorsen Sabriel, fifty-third of the line. With her was her apprentice Lirael, the Abhorsen-in-Waiting, who also bore the stars of the Clayr to show her own unique heritage: she was not only an Abhorsen, but also a Remembrancer, who could See deep into the past, just as the Clayr could See the future.

'She has evaded us,' said Sabriel, looking out over the grey and dismal river. She could feel the presence of the Dead, many of whom were lurking under the water, hoping to avoid her attention. But they were all lesser things than the one she and Lirael had hunted, a long and weary way. The desperately scrabbling small things about would weaken in time, and go on, without the need for interference.

'You're sure it was Chlorr of the Mask?' asked Lirael. She looked around more warily than Sabriel. This was only the eleventh time she had come into Death, and only the second time she had come so far, though once she had been very far indeed, to the border of the Ninth Gate. She was very grateful that Sabriel was by her side, while still not being quite able to quell a feeling of great loss. The last time Lirael had passed through the Sixth Precinct, her great friend the Disreputable Dog had accompanied her, lending the young woman great comfort and strength.

But the Dog was gone forever.

Lirael still felt the pain of that loss, and the dread, dismal days that had followed the binding of Orannis were never far from her thoughts. The only slight note of cheer from that time had come from Nicholas Sayre, who had told her how the Dog had sent him back from this same cold river, albeit on the very fringe of Life. Lirael would have liked to talk to Nicholas more about this,

particularly if he had seen which way the Dog went, grasping at the hope the wily hound had not gone towards the final gate.

In fact Lirael would have liked to see more of Nick in general, for he was one of the very few people she had ever met who she had immediately liked and had felt some unspoken connection to, or at least the potential for something of the sort.

But Nick was gone too. Not dead, thank the Charter. But returned to Ancelstierran regions far south of the Wall, to get him away from the pernicious magics of the Old Kingdom. He needed to escape the legacy of both Free Magic and the Charter to live a normal life, Lirael told herself.

She must forget him.

'It was definitely Chlorr,' said Sabriel, recapturing Lirael's momentarily wandering attention. The older woman wrinkled her nose. 'Over time, you'll learn to differentiate the various types of the Dead, and individuals strong enough to earn the description of Greater Dead. You sense it now, I suspect.'

'Yes . . .' said Lirael.

It was true she could feel the Dead all around, with that strange sense she had not known she possessed for much of her life. She narrowed her eyes and tried to sort through the different sensations, for that sense was something beyond sight and hearing, touch and smell, but it drew upon them all. There was the hint of something more powerful amid all the Dead about them, but it was a fading trace, like the scent of smoke from a fire extinguished some time before.

'Has Chlorr gone deeper into Death?' asked Lirael. She hoped the slight quaver in her voice was not apparent. She was quite prepared to go on if it was necessary. She only hoped it wasn't.

'No,' said Sabriel. 'I think she was too fast for us, and went sideways and then *back* towards Life. But to do that . . .'

She stopped talking and looked around again, intent upon the placid though still treacherous river. Lirael watched her, once again

marvelling that the famous Abhorsen, Queen of the Old Kingdom and the subject of so many stories that were already becoming legends, was also her relatively newly discovered half-sister. A twenty-years-older half-sister, though Lirael felt that after the events of the summer past, she was no longer so young herself.

'To do that,' repeated Sabriel, 'Chlorr must be anchored in Life.'

'Anchored in Life?' asked Lirael, startled. Chlorr of the Mask had been an ancient necromancer until she was physically slain by Sabriel. But she had not gone beyond the Ninth Gate, instead becoming a very powerful Greater Dead creature, a thing of fire and shadow that needed no flesh to inhabit out in the living world.

'I destroyed the shape she wore,' said Sabriel. 'But even at that time I wondered. She was very old, hundreds of years old. I could feel that age, a leaden weight within the far younger skin . . .'

She stopped talking and turned about in a circle, sniffing, her eyes narrowed. Lirael looked around too, listening to the faint sounds of movement in the river, sounds that would normally be obscured by the rush of the current.

'There are various ways to extend a life,' continued Sabriel, after a moment. 'I was too busy to consider which she had used, and became busier still, as you know. But now I think she must be connected to some anchor in Life. That is why she did not fully obey my bells, and did not die the final death.'

'But how . . .' stammered Lirael. 'How could she do that?'

'There are a number of methods, all of them foul,' mused Sabriel. 'Perhaps . . . I must tell you how Kerrigor did so, and there are passages from the *Book of the Dead* which speak to the point, though it may not show those pages to you. As always, it has its own ideas of when the reader is ready . . .'

'It certainly does,' said Lirael, who, despite considerable familiarity with sorcerous texts from her time as a librarian, was still unsettled by the way the contents of that strange tome were

never quite the same and how, reading it, she often felt the same bone-deep chill she felt in the river now.

Lirael spoke slowly, half her mind still focused on her sense of Death, and the Dead. There were things going on, small movements, like flotsam on the tide . . . it took her a few seconds to work out that the dozens and dozens of lesser Dead were gathering together, massing to form a host.

'We shall have to find out, in due course, but Chlorr by herself is not of primary importance,' said Sabriel. 'Not now Orannis is bound again, and provided she stays in the North. There are other, more immediate problems. Some at hand, I would say.'

Sabriel unfastened the strap that held her favourite bell quiet on her bandolier, her fingers closing on the clapper, bright Charter marks swarming from the silver bell to her hand. She smiled a slight, quirking smile. 'I think Chlorr has left us something of a surprise, even an ambush. It is interesting that these lesser things are more afraid of her than they are of us. We must correct that view.'

Lirael barely had time to draw her sword and a bell of her own before the Dead attacked, particularly as her right hand moved slowly. It was still being perfected, the new hand that had been made for her by Sameth of clever metalwork and considerable Charter Magic.

There were more than seventy Dead creatures reluctantly moving to attack. Most were warped and misshapen from too long in Death, their original shapes long lost, spirit flesh unable to maintain even a vaguely human shape. Some were squat, as if compressed to fit some awful container; some were stretched long. They had too many teeth, and shifted jaws, and talons or teeth in place of fingernails. Red fire burned in sockets where their eyes once were, and came dripping from their gaping, overstretched mouths.

Lurching and hopping, darting and zigzagging, they came, building courage as they approached, taking hope from the sheer numbers of their companions. They began to growl and slobber and shriek, thinking perhaps this time, they would feast on Life!

But as the throng of Dead finally charged, Sabriel rang Saraneth in a continuous figure-eight motion above her head. The pure, commanding tone of the bell cut through all the foul noises of the Dead, and at the same time the Abhorsen spoke. Not shouting, just speaking firmly, perhaps as she might to a child, or to a horse. Her words were backed by an implacable will, and the strength of the bell.

‘Be still.’

The charge faltered and came to a stop, Dead creatures stumbling over one another as those closer came first under the compulsion of the bell. Their cries faded, voices quailed. Even their fiery eyes grew dimmer, quenched by the power of Saraneth in the hand of the Abhorsen.

Sabriel flipped Saraneth and caught it by its clapper, silencing the bell. But its voice remained, a long-sustained echo, and the Dead did not move.

‘Good,’ said Sabriel, noting the bell the younger woman held. ‘Kibeth. The right bell will often come to your hand, unsought. Send them on, on to the final death.’

Lirael nodded, and rang Kibeth the Walker, a lively, leaping bell, so eager to sound that she had to exert herself to ring it true and not be carried away herself. And as always now, she had to steel herself, for in every peal she also heard the memory of a joyful dog’s bark, pleased at the prospect of going for a walk.

The Dead began to sob and groan under Kibeth’s spell, and then as one they turned and began to shuffle. Lirael kept the bell ringing, and the Dead started to run and hop and skip, slowly moving into a great circle, a horrible parody of some village dance as performed by monsters.

Twice this long parade of Dead trod around in an ever-closing circle, compelled by Kibeth; the third time the Sixth Gate opened under them with a great roar, drawing them down and onward, never to return.



chapter one

*an unlikely messenger  
at the gate*

Greenwash River Bridge, North Castle

Winter was hard in the North, beyond the borders of the Old Kingdom. The nomadic clans who lived on the steppe would seek the lower reaches before the snow began to fall, leaving the high plateau. But there was one tribe that did not roam so far, whatever the season. They lived in the mountains in the northwest, beyond the steppe, and did not ride or revere horses, though they would eat them if the opportunity presented itself.

These mountain-folk were easily distinguished from the other clans because they did not wear the long slit tunics and silk sashes of their nomadic cousins. Instead they favoured jerkins and breeches made of patchwork goatskin stitched with thick red thread, and rich cloaks from the fur of the *athask*, the huge cats that roamed their peaks and gave the clan its name. For weddings, feasts, and their own funerary pyres, they donned heavy bracelets and earrings made of alluvial gold from their mountain rivers.

It was unusual to see any of these folk outside their mountains at all, let alone hundreds of leagues to the south and east, so the guards on the gate tower of the Greenwash Bridge Company's north bank castle were understandably both curious and cautious when one such fur-wrapped, red-thread goatskin-patched nomad appeared as if from nowhere out of a swirling wet snowfall on a spring afternoon and shouted up at them, asking permission to cross the bridge into the Old Kingdom.

'You're no merchant,' called down the younger guard, who'd set his crossbow on the merlon, ready to snatch up and fire. 'So you have no business to cross the bridge.'

'I'm a messenger!' bawled the nomad. She was even younger than the young guard, perhaps having seen only sixteen or seventeen of the harsh winters of her homeland. Her lustrous skin was acorn brown, her hair black, worn in a plaited queue that was wound several times around her head like a crown, and her dark eyes appealing. 'I claim the message right!'

'What's that, Haral?' the younger guard asked his elder quietly. He'd only been with the Bridge Company eleven months, but Haral was an old-timer. She'd served twenty-six years, back into the bad old times before King Touchstone and the Abhorsen Sabriel restored order to the Old Kingdom. Before that restoration, the bridge and its castles on the northern and southern banks and the fort in the middle of the river had essentially been a fortress constantly under siege. It had been much more peaceful since, though there had been great trouble in the south in the last summer.

'The tribes give messengers immunity from challenges and feuds and the like,' said Haral. She looked down at this unusual – and unusually attractive – messenger, and thought it was just as well the younger guard wasn't here by himself. People who wanted to cross the bridge were not always what they seemed. Or were not actually people at all, apart from their outward form. 'But I didn't know the mountain-folk followed that custom.'

I've only ever seen them a couple of times before, and they were traders, going northward to home.'

'Who's the message for?' called out the young guard. His name was Aronsin, but everyone just called him Aron.

'Must I tell you?' asked the young nomad. It was an odd question, said as if she was uncertain of the etiquette involved, or unfamiliar with dealing with other people in general.

'It would be a start,' said Aron. He glanced at Haral, sensing her suddenly straighten up. She was peering out into the falling snow, looking into the distance, not at the nomad below.

'Thought I saw movement,' said Haral. She took a perspective glass from her belt, extended it, and held it to her eye. Having one nomad pop up almost at the gate could be blamed on the snow and the fading light, but to have any more get so close would be a dereliction of duty.

'So who's the message for?' asked Aron. He smiled down at the mountain girl, because he liked the look of her and he couldn't help himself. 'And what's your name?'

'The message is for the witches who live in the ice and see what is to be,' replied the mountain nomad reluctantly. 'My name . . . I don't really have a name.'

'People must call you something,' said Aron. He glanced over at Haral again, who had lowered the perspective glass but was still looking out, her eyes narrowed. With the snow beginning to fall more heavily, and the light fading with it, visibility was ebbing.

'Some call me Ferin,' said the nomad, the faintest hint of a smile quirking in the corner of her mouth, sign of a fond memory. 'Now, can you let me in?'

'I guess—' Aron started to say, but he stopped as Haral laid a hand on his shoulder, and pointed with the perspective glass.

Three figures were coming into sight out of the swirling snow and the lowering darkness. Two of them were on horseback,

nomads clad in the typical long woollen tunics of black and grey, slit at the sides for riding, and wound about the waist with multicoloured silk sashes. Those who knew could tell the tribe from the pattern of colours in a sash.

But they were not common nomads. One was a shaman, with a silver ring around his neck, and from that ring a chain of silvered iron ran to the hand of the second nomad, the shaman's keeper.

Even without seeing the neck-ring and silver chain, Haral and Aron knew immediately who . . . or what . . . the nomads must be, because the third of their number was neither on horseback, nor was it human.

It was a wood-weird, a creature of roughly carved and articulated ironwood, twice as tall as the horses, its big misshapen eyes beginning to glow with a hot red fire, evidence that the shaman was goading the Free Magic creature he'd imprisoned inside the loosely joined pieces of timber fully into motion. Wood-weirds were not so terrible a foe as some other Free Magic constructs, such as Spirit-Walkers, whose bodies were crafted from stone, for wood-weirds were not so entirely impervious to normal weapons. Nevertheless, they were greatly feared. And who knew what other servants or powers the shaman might have?

'The Guard! Alarm! Alarm!' roared Haral, cupping her hands around her mouth and looking up to the central tower. She was answered only a few seconds later by the blast of a horn from high above, echoed four or five seconds later from the mid-river fort, out of sight in the snow, and then again more distantly from the castle on the southern bank.

'Let me in!' shouted the mountain nomad urgently, even as she looked back over her shoulder. The wood-weird was striding ahead of the two nomads now, its long, rootlike legs stretching out, grasping limbs reaching forward for balance, strange fire streaming from its eyes and mouth like burning tears and spit.

The shaman sat absolutely still on his horse, deep in concentration. It took great effort of will to keep a Free Magic spirit of any kind from turning on its master – a master who was himself kept in check by the cunningly hinged asphyxiating ring of bright silver, which his keeper could pull tight should he try to turn his creatures upon his own people, or seek to carry out his own plans.

Though this particular keeper seemed to have little fear her sorcerer would turn, for she fixed the chain to the horn of her saddle and readied her bow, even though she was still well out of bowshot, particularly with the snow falling wet and steady. Once she got within range, she would get only two or three good shots before her string grew sodden. Perhaps only a single shot at that.

'We can't let you in now!' called down Aron. He had picked up his crossbow. 'Enemies in sight!'

'But they're after *me*!'

'We don't know that,' shouted Haral. 'This could be a trick to get us to open the gate. You said you were a messenger; they'll leave you alone.'

'No, they won't!' cried Ferin. She took her own bow from the case on her back, and drew a strange arrow from the case at her waist. The arrow's point was hooded with leather, tied fast. Holding bow and arrow with her left hand, she undid the cords of the hood and pulled it free, revealing an arrowhead of dark glass that sparkled with hidden fire, a faint tendril of white smoke rising from the point.

With it came an unpleasant, acrid taint, so strong it came almost instantly to the noses of the guards atop the wall.

'Free Magic!' shouted Aron. Raising his crossbow in one swift motion, he fired it straight down. Only Haral's sudden downward slap on the crossbow made the quarrel miss the nomad woman's gut, but even so it went clear through her leg just above the ankle, and there was suddenly blood spattered on the snow.

Ferin looked over her shoulder quickly, saw Haral restraining Aron so he couldn't ready another quarrel. Setting her teeth hard together against the pain in her leg, she turned back to face the wood-weird. It had risen up on its rough-hewn legs and was bounding forward, a good hundred paces ahead of the shaman, and it was still accelerating. Its eyes were bright as pitch-soaked torches newly lit, and great long flames roared from the widening gash in its head that served as a mouth.

Ferin drew her bow and released in one fluid motion. The shining glass arrow flew like a spark from a summer bonfire, striking the wood-weird square in the trunk. At first it seemed it had done no scathe, but then the creature faltered, took three staggering steps, and froze in place, suddenly more a strangely carved tree and less a terrifying creature. The flames in its eyes ebbed back, there was a flash of white inside the red, then its entire body burst into flame. A vast roil of dark smoke rose from the fire, gobbling up the falling snow.

In the distance the shaman screamed, a scream filled with equal parts anger and fear.

'Free Magic!' gasped Aron. He struggled with Haral. She had difficulty in restraining him, before she got him in an armlock and wrestled him down behind the battlements. 'She's a sorcerer!'

'No, no, lad,' said Haral easily. 'That was a spirit-glass arrow. It's Free Magic, sure enough, but contained, and can be used only once. They're very rare, and the nomads treasure them, because they are the only weapons they have which can kill a shaman or one of their creatures.'

'But she could still be—'

'I don't think so,' said Haral. The full watch was pounding up the stairs now; in a minute there would be two dozen guards spread out on the wall. 'But one of the Bridgemaster's Seconds can test her with Charter Magic. If she really is from the mountains, and has a message for the Clayr, we need to know.'

'The Clayr?' asked Aron. 'Oh, the witches in the ice, who see—'  
'More than you do,' interrupted Haral. 'Can I let you go?'

Aron nodded and relaxed. Haral released her hold and quickly stood up, looking out over the wall.

Ferin was not in sight. The wood-weird was burning fiercely, sending up a great billowing column of choking black smoke. The shaman and his keeper lay sprawled on the snowy ground, both dead with quite ordinary arrows in their eyes, evidence of peerless shooting at that range in the dying light. Their horses were running free, spooked by blood and sudden death.

'Where did she go?' asked Aron.

'Probably not very far,' said Haral grimly, gazing intently at the ground. There was a patch of blood on the snow there as big as the guard's hand, and blotches like dropped coins of bright scarlet continued for some distance, in the direction of the river shore.