

LIRÆL

daughter of the clayr




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*Ginee Seo, my editor at HarperCollins,
is owed many thanks for her editorial advice,
particularly for encouraging me to go back
and tell more of Lirael's story.*

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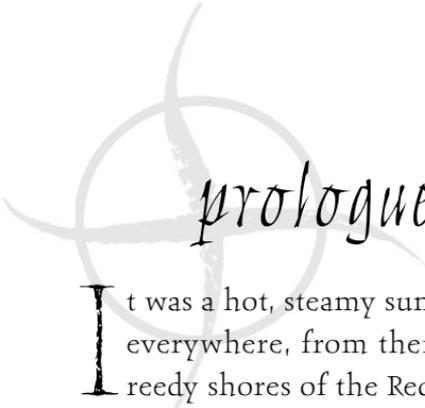
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*To Anna, my family and friends,
and to the memory of Bytenix (1986-1999),
the original Disreputable Dog.*





prologue

It was a hot, steamy summer and the mosquitoes swarmed everywhere, from their breeding grounds in the rotten, reedy shores of the Red Lake up to the foothills of Mount Abed. Small, bright-eyed birds swooped among the clouds of insects, eating their fill. Above them, birds of prey circled, to devour the smaller birds in turn.

But there was one place near the Red Lake where no mosquito or bird flew, and no grass or living thing would grow. A low hill, little more than two miles from the eastern shore. A mound of close-packed dirt and stones, stark and strange amidst the wild grassland that surrounded it, and the green forest that climbed the nearby hills.

The mound had no name. If one had ever appeared on a map of the Old Kingdom, the map was long lost. There had once been farms nearby, but never closer than a league. Even when people had lived there, they would neither look at the strange hill nor speak of it. The nearest town now was Edge, a precarious settlement that had never seen better days but had

not yet given up hope of them. The townsfolk of Edge knew it was wise to avoid the eastern shore of the Red Lake. Even the animals of the forest and the meadow shunned the area around the mound, as they instinctively stayed away from anyone who seemed to be going there.

Such as the man who stood on the fringe of the forest, where the hills melted into the lakeshore plain. A thin, balding man who wore a suit of leather armour that covered him from ankle to wrist, reinforced with plates of red-enamelled metal at his neck and every joint. He carried a naked sword in his left hand, the blade balanced across his shoulder. His right hand rested against a leather bandoleer worn diagonally across his chest. Seven pouches hung from the bandoleer, the smallest no larger than a pillbox, the largest as big as his clenched fist. Wooden handles hung downwards out of the pouches. Black ebony handles, which his fingers crawled across like a spider along a wall.

Anyone who had been there to see would have known that the ebony handles belonged to bells, and that in turn would identify the man by kind, if not by name. A necromancer, he carried the seven bells of his dark art.

The man looked down at the mound for some time, noting that he was not the first to come there that day. At least two people stood on the bare hill, and there was a shimmer of heat in the air that suggested that other, less visible beings stood there too.

The man considered waiting till dusk, but he knew he didn't have that choice. This was not his first visit to the mound. Power lay far beneath it, imprisoned deep within the earth. It had called him across the Kingdom, summoning him to its

presence on this Midsummer's Day. It called him now and he could not deny it.

Still, he retained enough pride and will to resist running the last half mile to the mound. It took all his strength, but when his boots touched the bare earth at the lip of the hill, it was with deliberation and no sign of haste.

One of the people there he knew and expected. The old man, the last of the line that had served the thing that lay under the mound, acting as a channel for the power that kept it hidden from the gaze of the witches who saw everything in their cave of ice. The fact that the old man was the last, without some snivelling apprentice at his side, was reassuring. The time was coming when it need no longer hide beneath the earth.

The other person was unknown. A woman, or something that had once been a woman. She wore a mask of dull bronze, and the heavy furs of the Northern barbarians. Unnecessary, and uncomfortable, in this weather... unless her skin felt something other than the sun. She wore several rings of bone upon her silk-gloved fingers.

"You are Hedge," the stranger declared.

The man was surprised by the crackle of power in her speech. She was a Free Magic sorcerer, as he'd suspected, but a more powerful one than he could have guessed. She knew his name, or one of them – the least of his names, the one he had used most often in recent times. He too was a Free Magic sorcerer, as all necromancers had to be.

"A Servant of Kerrigor," continued the woman. "I see his brand upon your forehead, though your disguise is not without some skill."

Hedge shrugged and touched what appeared to be a Charter mark on his forehead. It cracked in two and fell off like a broken scab, revealing an ugly scar that crawled and wriggled on his skin. "I carry the brand of Kerrigor," he replied evenly. "But Kerrigor is gone, bound by the Abhorsen and imprisoned these last fourteen years."

"You will serve me now," said the woman, in tones that brooked no argument. "Tell me how I may commune with the power that lies under this mound. It too will bend itself to my will."

Hedge bowed, hiding his grin. Was this not reminiscent of how he had come to the mound himself, in the days after Kerrigor's fall?

"There is a stone on the western side," he said, pointing with his sword. "Swing it aside and you will see a narrow tunnel, striking sharply down. Follow the tunnel till the way is blocked by a slab of stone. At the foot of the stone, you will see water seeping through. Taste of the water and you will perceive the power of which you speak."

He did not mention that the tunnel was his, the product of five years' toil, nor that the seeping water was the first visible sign of a struggle for freedom that had gone on for more than two thousand years.

The woman nodded, the thin line of pallid skin around the mask giving no hint of expression, as if the face behind it were as frozen as the metal. Then she turned aside and spoke a spell, white smoke gushing from the mouthpiece of the mask with every word. When she finished, two creatures rose up from where they'd lain at her feet, nearly invisible against the earth.

Two impossibly thin, vaguely human things, with flesh of swiftly moving mist and bones of blue-white fire. Free Magic elementals of the kind that humans called Hish.

Hedge watched them carefully and licked his lips. He could deal with one, but two might force him to reveal strengths best left veiled for the moment. The old man would be no help. Even now he just sat there, mumbling, a living conduit for some part of the power under the hill.

"If I do not return by nightfall," the woman said, "my servants will rend you asunder, flesh and spirit too, should you seek refuge in Death."

"I will wait here," Hedge replied, settling himself down on the raw earth. Now that he knew the Hish's instructions, they represented no threat. He laid down his sword and turned one ear to the mound, pressing it against the soil. He could hear the constant whisper of the power below, through all the layers of earth and stone, though his own thoughts and words could not penetrate the prison. Later, if it was necessary, he would go into the tunnel, drink of the water and lay his mind open, sending his thoughts back along the finger-wide trickle that had broken through all seven thrice-spelled wards. Through silver, gold and lead; rowan, ash and oak; and the seventh ward of bone.

Hedge didn't bother to watch the woman go, or stir when he heard the sound of the great stone being rolled away, even though it was a feat beyond the strength of any normal man, or any number of normal men.

When the woman returned, Hedge was standing at the very centre of the mound, looking south. The Hish stood near him,

but made no move as their mistress climbed back up. The old man sat where he always had, still gibbering, though whether he spoke spells or nonsense Hedge couldn't say. It was no magic he knew, though he felt the power of the hill in the old man's voice.

"I will serve," the woman said.

The arrogance, though not the power, was gone from her voice. Hedge saw the muscles in her neck spasm as she spoke the words. He smiled and raised his hand. "There are Charter Stones that have been raised too close to the hill. You will destroy them."

"I will," agreed the woman, lowering her head.

"You were a necromancer," continued Hedge. In years past, Kerrigor had drawn all the necromancers of the Kingdom to him, to serve as petty underlords. Most had perished, either in Kerrigor's fall or, in the years after, at the hands of the Abhorsen. Some survived still, but this woman had never been a Servant of Kerrigor.

"Long ago," said the woman.

Hedge felt the faint flicker of Life inside her, buried deep under the spell-coated furs and the bronze mask. She was old, this sorcerer, very, very old – not an advantage for a necromancer who must walk in Death. That cold river had a particular taste for those who had evaded its clutches beyond their given span of years.

"You will take up the bells again, for you will need many Dead for the work that lies ahead." Hedge unbuckled his own bandoleer and handed it over cautiously, careful not to jar the bells into sound. For himself he had another set of the seven,

taken from a lesser necromancer in the chaos following Kerrigor's defeat. There would be some risk retrieving them, for they lay in that main part of the Kingdom long since reclaimed by the King and his Abhorsen Queen. But he had no need of the bells for his immediate plans, and could not take them where he intended to go.

The woman took the bells but did not put on the bandoleer. Instead, she stretched out her right hand, palm upwards. A tiny spark glinted there, a splinter of metal that shone with its own bright, white fire. Hedge held out his own hand and the splinter leapt across, burying itself just under the skin, without drawing blood. Hedge held it up to his face, feeling the power in the metal. Then he slowly closed his fingers and smiled.

It was not for him, this sliver of arcane metal. It was a seed, a seed that could be planted in many soils. Hedge had a particular purpose for it, a most fertile bed where it could grow to its full fruit. But it would likely be many years before he could plant it where it would do most harm.

"And you?" asked the woman. "What do you do?"

"I go south, Chlorr of the Mask," said Hedge, revealing that he knew her name – and much else besides. "South to Ancelstierre, across the Wall. The country of my birth, though in spirit I am no child of its powerless soil. I have much to do there, and even further afield. But you will hear from me when I have need. Or if I hear news that is not to my liking"

He turned then and walked off without further word. For a master need make no farewells to any of his servants.

part one

the old kingdom

fourteenth year of the restoration
of king touchstone I

chapter one

an ill-favoured birthday

Deep within a dream, Lirael felt someone stroking her forehead. A gentle, soft touch, a cool hand upon her own fevered skin. She felt herself smile, enjoying the touch. Then the dream shifted and her forehead wrinkled. The touch was no longer soft and loving, but rough and rasping. No longer cool, but hot, burning her—

She woke up. It took her a second to realise that she'd clawed the sheet away and had been lying facedown on the coarsely woven mattress cover. It was wool and very scratchy. Her pillow lay on the floor. The pillowcase had been torn off in the course of some nightmare and now hung from her chair.

Lirael looked around the small chamber, but there were no signs of any other nocturnal damage. Her simple wardrobe of dressed pine was upright, the dull steel latch still closed. The desk and chair still occupied the other corner. Her practice sword hung in its scabbard on the back of the door.

It must have been a relatively good night. Sometimes, in her nightmare-laced sleep, Lirael walked, talked and wreaked havoc. But always only in her room. Her precious room. She

couldn't bear to think what life would be like if she were forced to go back to family chambers.

She closed her eyes again and listened. All was silent, which meant that it must be long before the Waking Bell. The bell sounded at the same time every day, calling the Clayr out of their beds to join the new morning.

Lirael scrunched her eyes together more tightly and tried to go back to sleep. She wanted to regain the feel of that hand on her brow. That touch was the only thing she remembered of her mother. Not her face or her voice – just the touch of her cool hand.

She needed that touch desperately today. But Lirael's mother was long gone, taking the secret of Lirael's paternity with her. She had left when Lirael was five, without a word, without an explanation. There never was any explanation. Just the news of her death, a garbled message from the distant North that had arrived three days before Lirael's tenth birthday.

Once she had thought of that, there was no hope for sleep. As on every other morning, Lirael gave up trying to keep her eyes shut. She let them spring open and stared up at the ceiling for a few minutes. But the stone had not changed overnight. It was still grey and cold, with tiny flecks of pink.

A Charter mark for light glowed there too, warm and golden in the stone. It had shone brighter when Lirael had first awoken and grew brighter still as she swung her feet out and felt around with her toes for her half-shoes. The Clayr's halls were heated by the steam of hot springs and by magic, but the stone floor was always cold.

"Fourteen today," whispered Lirael. She had her half-shoes

on, but made no move to rise. Ever since the message of her mother's death had come so close to her tenth birthday, all her birthdays had been harbingers of doom.

"Fourteen!" Lirael said again, the word laced with anguish. She was fourteen, and by the measure of the world outside the Clayr's Glacier, a woman. But here she must still wear the blue tunic of a child, for the Clayr marked the passage to adulthood not by age, but by the gift of the Sight.

Once again, Lirael closed her eyes, screwing them tight as she willed herself to See the future. Everyone else her age had the Sight. Many younger children already wore the white robe and the circlet of moonstones. It was unheard of not to have the Sight by fourteen.

Lirael opened her eyes, but she saw no vision. Just her simple room, slightly blurred by tears. She rubbed them away and got up.

"No mother, no father, no Sight," she said as she opened her wardrobe and took out a towel. It was a familiar litany. She said it often, though it always made her feel a terrible stab of sorrow in her stomach. It was like worrying a toothache with her tongue. It hurt, but she couldn't leave it alone. The wound was part of her now.

But perhaps one day soon, she would be summoned by the Voice of the Nine Day Watch. Then she would wake and say, "No mother, no father, but I have the Sight"

"I will have the Sight," Lirael muttered to herself as she eased open the door and tiptoed down the corridor to the baths. Charter marks brightened as she passed under them, bringing day from twilight. But all the other doors in the Hall of Youth

remained shut. Once, Lirael would have knocked on them, laughing and calling the other orphans who lived there to an early bath.

But that was years ago. Before they had all gained the Sight.

That was also when Merell was Guardian of the Young, one who had governed her charges with a light hand. Lirael's own aunt Kirrith was Guardian now. If there was any noise, she would emerge from her room in her maroon and white striped bathrobe, to order silence and respect for sleeping elders. She would make no special allowance for Lirael, either. Quite the reverse. Kirrith was the exact opposite of Lirael's mother, Arielle. She was all for rules and regulations, tradition and conformity.

Kirrith would never leave the Glacier to travel who knew where, only to return seven months gone with child. Lirael scowled at Kirrith's door. Not that Kirrith had ever told her that. Kirrith wouldn't talk about her younger sister. The little Lirael knew about her mother came from eavesdropping on her closer cousins' conversations. The ones during which they discussed what to do about a girl who so obviously didn't belong.

Lirael scowled again at that thought. The scowl didn't go away, even when she was scraping her face with pumice stone in the hot bath. Only the shock of the cold plunge in the long pool finally smoothed the lines away.

The lines came back, though, as Lirael combed her hair in the communal mirror in the changing room next to the cold pool. The mirror was a rectangle of silver steel, eight feet high and twelve feet wide, rather tarnished around the edges. Later in the morning it would be shared by up to eight of the

fourteen orphans currently in the Hall of Youth.

Lirael hated sharing the mirror, because it made yet another difference more obvious. Most of the Clayr had brown skin that quickly tanned to a deep chestnut out on the Glacier slopes, as well as bright blonde hair and light eyes. In contrast Lirael stood out like a pallid weed among healthy flowers. Her white skin burnt instead of tanning, and she had dark eyes and even darker hair.

She knew she probably took after her father, whoever that had been. Arielle had never identified him, yet another shame for her suffering daughter to carry. The Clayr often bore children fathered by visiting men, but they didn't usually leave the Glacier to find them, and they made no secret of the fathers. And for some reason, they almost always had girls. Fair-haired, nut-brown girls with pale blue or green eyes.

Except for Lirael.

Alone in front of the mirror, Lirael could forget all that. She concentrated on combing her hair, forty-nine strokes to each side. She was feeling more hopeful. Perhaps this would be the day. A fourteenth birthday marked by the best possible present. The gift of the Sight.

Even so, Lirael had no desire to eat breakfast in the Middle Refectory. Most of the Clayr ate there, and she would have to sit at a table with girls three or even four years younger, sticking out like a thistle in a bed of well-tended flowers. A blue-clad thistle. Everyone else her age would be dressed in white, sitting at the tables of the crowned and acknowledged Clayr.

Instead, Lirael crossed two silent corridors and descended two stairways that spiralled in opposite directions, down to the

Lower Refectory. This was where the traders ate, and the supplicants who came to ask the Clayr to look into their futures. The only Clayr here would be those on the kitchen or serving rosters.

Or almost the only Clayr. There was one other who Lirael hoped would come. The Voice of the Nine Day Watch. As she walked down the last steps, Lirael imagined the scene. The Voice striding down the main stairs, striking the gong, then stopping to make her announcement that the Nine Day Watch had Seen her – Seen Lirael – being crowned with the circlet of moonstones, had Seen her gaining the Sight at last.

The Lower Refectory wasn't very busy that morning. Only three of the sixty tables were occupied. Lirael went to a fourth, as far away from the others as possible, and drew out the bench. She preferred to sit alone, even when she was not among the Clayr.

Two of the tables were occupied by merchants, probably from Belisaere, talking loudly of the peppercorns, ginger, nutmeg and cinnamon they had imported from the far North and hoped to sell to the Clayr. Their conversation about the quality and strength of their spices was all too evidently meant to be heard by the Clayr working in the kitchens.

Lirael sniffed the air. Their claims might even be true. The scent of cloves and nutmeg from the merchants' bags was very strong, but pleasant. Lirael took it as another good omen.

The third table was taken up by the merchants' guards. Even here, inside the Clayr's Glacier, they wore armoured coats of interlocking scales and kept their scabbarded swords close by, under the benches. Obviously, they thought bandits or worse

could easily follow the narrow path along the river gorge and force the gate that led to the Clayr's vast complex.

Of course, they would not have been able to see most of the defences. The river path crawled with Charter marks of hiding and blinding, and under the flat paving stones there were sendings of beasts and warriors that would rise up at the slightest threat. The path also crossed the river no less than seven times, on slender bridges of ancient construction, apparently spun from stone. Easily defended bridges – with the river Ratterlin running below, deep enough and fast enough to keep any Dead from crossing.

Even here in the Lower Refectory there was Charter Magic lying dormant in the walls, and sendings that slept in the rough-hewn stone of floor and ceiling. Lirael could see the Charter marks, faint as they were, and puzzle out the spells they made up. The sendings were harder, because only the marks to trigger them were clear. Of course, there were clearly visible marks as well, the ones that shed light here and everywhere else within the Clayr's underground domain, bored into the rock of the mountain, next to the icy mass of the Glacier.

Lirael scanned the visitors' faces. Without helmets, their close-cropped hair made it easy to see that none had the Charter mark upon their forehead. So they almost certainly couldn't see the magic that surrounded them. Instinctively, Lirael parted her own rather too-long hair and felt her mark. It pulsed lightly under her touch and she felt the sense of connection, the feeling of belonging to the great Charter that described the world. At least she was something of a Charter Mage, even if she didn't have the Sight.

The merchants' guards should trust more in the Clayr's defences, Lirael thought, looking at the armoured men and women again. One of them saw her glance, and met her eyes for an instant, till she looked away. In that fleeting moment she saw a young man, his head even more closely shaven than the others, so his scalp shone when it caught the light from the Charter marks in the ceiling.

Though she tried to ignore him, Lirael saw the guard get up and walk across, his scale coat too big for someone who would not see his real growth for several years. Lirael scowled as he approached and turned her head away even more. Just because the Clayr did occasionally take lovers from among the visitors, some people thought that any of the Clayr visiting the Lower Refectory would be hunting for a man. This notion seemed particularly strong among young men of sixteen or thereabouts.

"Excuse me," said the guard. "May I sit here?"

Lirael nodded reluctantly, and he sat, a cascade of scales rattling down his chest in a slow waterfall of metal.

"I'm Barra," he said cheerfully. "Is this your first time here?"

"What?" asked Lirael, puzzled and shy. "In the Refectory?"

"No," said Barra, laughing and stretching his arms out to indicate a much larger vista. "Here. In the Clayr's Glacier. This is my second visit, so if you need someone to show you around... though I guess your parents might trade here often?"

Lirael looked away again, feeling bright spots burn into her cheekbones. She tried to think of something to say, some snappy rejoinder, but all she could think was that even outsiders knew she wasn't really a Clayr. Even a stupid, undergrown, rattling clod like this one.

"What's your name?" asked Barra, oblivious to the blush and the terrible emptiness that had grown inside her.

Lirael swallowed and wet her lips, but no answer came. She felt as if she didn't have a name to give, or an identity at all. She couldn't even look at Barra because her eyes were full of tears, so she stared at the half-eaten pear on her plate instead.

"I just wanted to say hello," said Barra uneasily, as the silence stretched out between them.

Lirael nodded and two tears fell on the pear. She didn't look up or try to wipe her eyes. Her arms felt as limp and useless as her voice.

"I'm sorry," Barra added as he clanked to his feet. Lirael watched him go back to his table, her eyes partly covered by a protective fall of hair. When he was a few feet away, one of the men said something, not loud enough to hear. Barra shrugged, and the men – and some of the women – burst into laughter.

"It's my birthday," Lirael whispered to her plate, her voice more full of tears than her eyes. "I must not cry on my birthday." She stood up and clumsily stepped over the bench, taking her plate and fork to the scullery hatch, being careful not to catch the eye of whichever first, second or third cousin worked there.

She was still holding the plate when one of the Clayr came down the main stairs and struck with her metal-tipped wand the first of the seven gongs that stood on the bottom seven steps. Lirael froze, and everyone in the Refectory stopped talking as the Clayr descended, striking each gong in turn, the different notes of the gongs merging into one before they echoed away into silence.

At the bottom step, the Clayr stopped and held up her wand. Lirael's heart leapt inside her, while her stomach knotted in anxiety. It was exactly as she had imagined. So like it that she felt sure that it hadn't been imagination, but the onset of the Sight.

Sohrae, as her wand declared, was currently the Voice of the Nine Day Watch, the Voice who made the announcements when the Watch Saw something of public importance to the Clayr or the Kingdom. Most important, the Voice also announced when the Watch had Seen the girl who would be next to gain the Sight.

"Know one, know many," proclaimed Sohrae, her clear voice carrying to every corner of the Refectory and the kitchens and the scullery beyond. "The Nine Day Watch with great gladness announce that the Gift of Sight has Awoken in our sister..."

Sohrae took a breath to go on, and Lirael shut her eyes, knowing that Sohrae was about to say her name. It must, it must, it *must* be me, she thought. Two years later than everyone, and today my birthday. It has to—

"Annisele," intoned Sohrae. Then she turned and went up the stairs again, lightly striking the gongs, their sound a soft undercurrent to the talk that had resumed among the visitors.

Lirael opened her eyes. The world had not changed. She did not have the Sight. Everything would go on as it always had. Miserably.

"Can I have your plate, please?" asked the unseen cousin behind the scullery hatch. "Oh, Lirael! I thought you were a visitor. You'd better hurry back upstairs, dear. Annisele's Awakening will start inside the hour. This is the Voice's last stop, you know. Whyever did you eat down here?"

Lirael didn't answer. She let the plate go and crossed the Refectory like a sleepwalker, her fingers listlessly brushing the table corners as she passed. All she could think of was Sohrae's voice, running over and over in her head.

"The gift of Sight has Awoken in our sister Annisele."

Annisele. Annisele would be the one to wear the white robe, to be crowned with the silver and moonstones, while Lirael once again would have to put on her best blue tunic, the uniform of a child. The tunic that no longer had a hem because it had been let out so many times. The tunic that was still too short.

Annisele had just turned eleven ten days ago. But her birthday would be nothing compared to this day, the day of her Awakening.

Birthdays *were* nothing, Lirael thought, as she mechanically put one foot in front of the other, up the six hundred steps from the Lower Refectory to the Westway, along that path for two hundred paces, and then up the hundred and two steps to the back door of the Hall of Youth. She counted every step and looked no one in the eye. All she saw was the sweep of white robes and the flash of black-slippered feet, as all the Clayr rushed to the Great Hall to honour the latest girl to join the ranks of those who Saw the future.

By the time she reached her room, Lirael found that any small joy to be had from her birthday was gone. Extinguished, snuffed out like a candle. It was Annisele's day now, Lirael thought. She had to try to be happy for Annisele. She had to ignore the terrible sorrow that was welling up in her own heart.