

The Central Kingdoms
Chronicles: Book Two

Prince
Thorgils'
War

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1. FOLLOWING WIND

Funerals are for the living. The deceased aren't listening to what you have to say to them, so save your breath. One day, you might regret having wasted it.

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The last time Artimus died, it had been comparatively painless. Now, the only parts of his body that didn't hurt were his fingers, and only because he couldn't feel those at all. He still couldn't breathe; the fall must have broken his ribs. Deprived of oxygen, his mind began to wander.

Casting the spell to stave off the necromancer's reinforcements had sapped the last of his strength. It had been a necessary sacrifice. He couldn't let the necromancer gain an advantage over his opponent. The one-armed cleric was already fighting against greater odds than a more generous god would have allowed. Artimus had done all he could to help. Soon it would all be over, one way or another.

The taste of his own blood filled Artimus' mouth. He collapsed, breathless and limp, onto the warm stone of the cavern floor. He struggled to stay awake. He didn't dare look away from the combatants circling one another

in the firelight nearby. He'd come too far to miss the ending now.

The outcome of the battle wouldn't determine the fate of the world; the necromancer was right about that. It would, however, reveal what that fate was. Was this the world Artimus hoped it was, where good triumphed over evil? Or was it the world it seemed to be, where greed and hatred ensured a never-ending cycle of war and death? Artimus was desperate to know.

He'd been such a fool in the beginning. The journey to get here had been so long, and he *had* to see how it all ended. But he was so tired. Even in a just world, sometimes courage and conviction weren't enough.

Artimus closed his eyes and passed out.

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A cool Southern Sea breeze whipped at Artimus' robe as he watched the ship's crew nail shut the lid of the improvised coffin. Beside him, Talas led the assembled mourners in a prayer for the murdered king.

"We gather here in this fading evening light to witness the final passage of Grath Falloe, King of Ranaloy. Let us not mourn his departure, for like the setting sun, his light has not been extinguished. It has only been hidden from our view."

Artimus wasn't listening. His thoughts were preoccupied with his failures. He had tried to tell the king that he wasn't fit to be Royal Wizard. He'd tried to explain that he was still an apprentice – and a bad one at that. But Grath had insisted that Artimus replace his dead master, Trafar. Kings were not the sort to take "no" for an answer.

Not that Grath really had any other options. Trafar

had only two apprentices. Yurie was better than Artimus at everything, but he'd joined Grath's nephew, Prince Thorgils, in the plot to overthrow and murder the king. If Yurie hadn't joined Thorgils, Trafar would still be alive. In either case, King Grath wouldn't have chosen Yurie to be his Royal Wizard. The job fell to Artimus by default. He certainly hadn't earned it.

"We release Grath to the sea so that he may rejoin his queen, Brinsa, who preceded him into the final frontier," Talas continued. "Their marriage may have been born in politics, but it was raised in love. Reunited, may they rest in peace."

The same assassin that had killed the king had dumped Queen Brinsa's body overboard. The assassin's identity would still be a secret if not for Tremene's dog, Czar. Defending the king and queen against Thorgils' treachery had been Artimus's first test as Royal Wizard. He had failed badly. The dog probably would have made a better choice for Royal Wizard.

This burial at sea had been Talas' suggestion. Artimus would have preferred to return Grath's body to Ranaloy where it could be interred in the Falloe family tomb. Talas had disagreed. He believed it would be a mistake to deliver the body back into Thorgils' hands where he could use it to legitimize his claim to the throne. Although Talas was reluctant to say anything about it in front of Grath's retainers, he was also determined to keep the king's body away from Thorgils' necromancer, Kurse. Whatever political purposes Thorgils might use Grath's body for were benign compared to the indignities that a necromancer could inflict. Artimus had to concede that Talas was probably right. He usually was.

Artimus looked over the crowd of mourners.

Whisper, Tremene, and Czar stood out from the assembled humans. Tremene was an elf. Whisper was a woman carved of stone. The wizard wondered what they were thinking.

Not so long ago – although it felt like years – Tremene had buried his own brother. Then as now, his expression was inscrutable. It was the only expression he owned; he rarely smiled and never laughed. Artimus was certain that the elf was mourning in his own way – he'd successfully saved Grath from poison only to be accused of the king's eventual murder – but he looked more irritated than sad.

Beside him, Whisper was no less an enigma. She had come back from the dead, resurrected into a body of stone through arcane magic. Her transformation into a stone golem had left her distant and impassive. Although the stonemason dwarves had reshaped her body into a form that inspired all sorts of lustful thoughts in Artimus, she still didn't breathe or blink, and her face betrayed no emotion. Was she reliving memories of her own funeral? For all Artimus knew, she might be asleep right now.

"As we say our final goodbyes to our king, we shall not be sad. Grath was a noble leader of Ranaloy, a celebrated hero of the Trifold War, a loving husband, and a good man. He has earned his rest," Talas said. He bowed to the dead king one last time.

At Talas' signal, Borenson and seven of his fellow surviving Royal Guardsmen lifted the coffin and carried it towards Artimus at the ship's edge. They moved slowly, partly out of respect and partly because the deck of the ship, the *Zegfield's Folly*, was severely damaged. Nooncel, the former Captain of the Royal Guard, had summoned a sea monster in an attempt to distract from

the assassinations, and the kraken's tentacles had torn up the deck and broken the mizzen mast and rigging. Though Whisper's incredible golem-strength had made repairing the mast possible, there was nothing to be done about the decking until they reached port.

The pallbearers carefully set one end of the crate on the ship's rail. Talas raised his hand over his heart. "O God, we now deliver the remains of this good man into your care. Farewell, King Grath of Ranaloy. We salute you."

Kaboom! The *Zegfield's Folly* cannons fired in honor of the deceased. Despite being understandably shaken from his experience as Nooncel's hostage, Captain Zegfield had insisted that he and his crew participate in the funeral service. It was his duty as captain, he'd said. No one had argued, not even Silas, whose defining character trait was his ill-tempered belligerence.

Silas watched the funeral proceedings from the forecastle. The mercenary had never cared for royalty or ceremony or crowds. He was a natural loner accustomed to making enemies wherever he went, even among the people who shared his goals. Few of his traveling companions would call him a friend, especially not Tremene. Silas and the elf were often yelling at one another over the most minor disagreements. That didn't bother Artimus. He liked Silas anyway.

In a funny way, Thorgils had done Artimus a favor that day he had thrown them all in the dungeon under Royal Castle. Artimus had always been an outcast, a friendless orphan. It was Thorgils' greed that had forced him into joining Silas and Talas and the others in their desperate quest to find King Grath. In their months together, the traveling companions had become more than friends. Artimus considered them the family he'd

never had.

Kaboom! Before the sound of the second round of cannon fire died out, the soldiers pushed the coffin overboard. Artimus watched it splash into the sea. It bobbed briefly before sinking in a briny foam. It was soon lost beneath the waves.

Talas put a comforting hand on Artimus' back. "How are you holding up?"

Artimus sighed. "I'll get by, I guess."

"Good. They need you to be strong." The cleric nodded towards Grath's retainers. "You're the last link they have to their king. They look to you for hope, hope that somehow this can all be made to make sense, hope that Thorgils can be brought to justice."

"I know, but I'm just a cursed apprentice." Artimus raised his left hand, and the enchanted Manacle of Confusion on his wrist glinted in the setting sunlight. "Remember this? It could generate an evil twin to show up at any time. I don't have the first clue what to do about that. What would I possibly know about defeating Thorgils?"

"The only true wisdom consists in knowing that you know nothing."

"That sounds like us, all right."

Talas smiled. "Chin up, Artimus. You're not in this alone. I'm with you until the end. So are the others. We'll find a way."

The end. The words echoed in Artimus' head. He couldn't imagine that this adventure would resolve happily. But Talas had a point. He couldn't stop fighting just because he was tired or confused. If he quit, Thorgils won. That wasn't something that he could let happen.

Artimus looked back down at the water. The calm

waves betrayed no sign of Grath's passage. Artimus took it as a sign. The past was gone, and there could be no looking back. It was time to put his failures behind him and move on.

He waved his final farewell to his king and walked with Talas to rejoin their friends.

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