

The Central Kingdoms
Chronicles: Book Four

Specter of the Lich

JAMES WALTER STEPHENS

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1. RETURN TO RANALOY

The entire universe conspires against me. None of my plans have turned out the way I wanted, all of my dreams have been denied. But I'm no quitter. Rather than lose this game of life, I think I'll change the rules.



Everyone was dead, and it was all Artimus' fault.

Not directly, of course. He hadn't been the one to cast the spell. However, he hadn't done anything to prevent it, either. He'd been too preoccupied with his own problems to see the real danger. Now Artimus was trapped in a hell of his own making.

Like a fool, Artimus had believed that defeating the necromancer Kurse on Apocalypse Night had saved the Central Kingdoms. But Kurse wasn't the only madman who desired a future filled with death and horror. That was a lesson that Artimus had learned too late.

Everyone in Sewert, everyone in the Central Kingdoms, everyone he had ever known or loved: they were all dead. Even his own son. And it was all his fault.

...

Artimus descended from his ivory tower with one hand carefully on the stair rail. He didn't need the extra support; despite his advancing age, he was in perfect health. Still, it was better to err on the side of caution. A fall down the stone steps—something he had yet to do in his thirty years as Ranaloy's Royal Wizard—might result in an extended bed stay or worse. Artimus certainly wouldn't mind spending time in bed with a good book, but he had far more important things to do than nurse an injury. (A Royal Wizard's work was never done.)

With that in mind, Artimus paused to adjust his robe. He'd had it specially tailored to help disguise the functional dragon wings that grew naturally out of his back. While the Royal Castle staff were all quite accustomed to the wings by now, Artimus was still careful to keep them out of sight when visitors were around. This wasn't quite as hard as it might seem. Artimus was naturally a large man in all dimensions, and most of the people he met were inclined to assume the bulk underneath his robe was simply fat.

Before resuming his descent, Artimus ran his fingers over his long gray hair and beard to ensure they weren't too wild. Wizards were allowed a great deal of latitude in regards to personal grooming, and he had taken advantage of this in the past. But these days, Artimus had to set a good example for the others, especially when he was expected in court.

Kurgan was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. "For an old guy with wings, you sure move slow enough," he said.

Artimus gave the young man a thin smile. "The first lesson wizards learn is that longevity comes from protecting the life you have."

Kurgan cocked an eyebrow. “Then I guess you’ll live forever.”

Artimus laughed politely. “I’m not greedy. A few hundred years should be long enough,” he said. “Now come on. We’d best not keep the king or his guest waiting.” Together, the pair started towards the Great Hall.

Kurgan asked, “Why do you think the king summoned you? Did the messenger come to see you?”

Artimus admired the boy’s curiosity. More and more, Kurgan reminded him of himself as a young man. Maybe that was the reason he was uncomfortable having him around. “We’ll see soon enough,” Artimus said. “Mind your manners in front of castle visitors. You remember what happened last time.”

“But the king said—”

“The king is kind and generous, but we should treat him with the deference his station deserves. We are guests in his castle who serve at his pleasure, and we will behave ourselves as such, yes?”

When Kurgan didn’t answer immediately, Artimus paused and gave him a stern look. The headstrong youth really had no appreciation for courtly manners. It didn’t help that the king had spent most of his early life among the commoners and didn’t act very kingly in private. While the king’s permissive attitude might be setting a bad precedent for the castle’s newest arrival, it was ultimately Artimus’ responsibility to see that Kurgan learned the difference between right and wrong.

Kurgan reluctantly returned Artimus’ gaze. “I don’t.... Yes, sir. I understand,” he said at last. Satisfied, Artimus gave the youth a reassuring smile before continuing deeper into the castle.

They found the king on his throne at the far end of the Great Hall. He wasn’t alone. Two men stood before him. The younger one—he didn’t look much older than

Kurgan—wore a white surcoat emblazoned with a stylized sun. The other wore a suit of armor. Artimus was briefly overcome by the powerful sensation of having done this before.

The memory came to him unbidden. He had been a mere apprentice then. That encounter—standing beside Talas and Silas facing Prince Thorgils—had started Artimus on an adventure he did not care to repeat. Artimus squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep breath to clear his head.

“While I thank you for coming so quickly, Artimus, I didn’t mean for you to wind yourself,” said King Arthraelon. His mirthful tone did little to offset the expression of genuine concern on his face.

“Never let it be said that the Royal Wizard keeps His Highness waiting,” Artimus replied. “How may I assist you today, Sire?”

“It is not I who needs your assistance. Artimus and Kurgan, please meet Boras and his bodyguard, Darse,” said the king, introducing the youth and knight respectively. “I believe you knew Boras’ mother, High Priestess Jilljo.”

Artimus smiled warmly. He hadn’t seen Jilljo in decades. The last he’d heard, she’d been appointed Steward of the Cathedral of the Sun in Lansin. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Boras. But I assume this isn’t a social visit?” The wizard already knew the answer to the question before he asked it. Besides the fact that the young man had introduced himself formally to the King of Ranaloy, a clear demonstration of official diplomatic protocol, Artimus could also read Boras’ mind.

Unlike his aptitude for magic and his dragon wings, both of which he owed to his rare genetic heritage, Artimus’ mental powers had been an unintentional gift from Silas. Telepathy was a useful but imprecise ability that allowed him to listen to an individual’s surface

thoughts much as one might listen in to the conversation across the table at a dinner party. In this case, Artimus had already “heard” that Boras had come in his role as messenger for the city of Sewert.

Boras nodded curtly. “You are correct, sir. I’ve been sent by the Mayor of Sewert to retrieve you. Ico Nardeth needs your help.”

Artimus’ smile faded into a frown. He and Ico had never been friends, exactly. After defeating the necromancer Kurse and saving Sewert, they’d gone their separate ways. Artimus was aware that Ico had leveraged his fame as one of the Heroes of Apocalypse Night into a political position as the leader of the city-state of Sewert. Although Artimus had visited Sewert a few times in the decades since, he hadn’t gotten the impression that Mayor Ico had much to say to him. If Ico was summoning him now, there must be a good reason.

“Did Ico say why I was needed?” Artimus asked.

“No,” Boras answered.

“He can’t expect me to travel all the way to Sewert without giving cause.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I was told only that your unique expertise was needed to provide guidance to the mayor.”

Kurgan snorted. “Is the Royal Wizard of Ranaloy a dog expected to respond to this Ico’s whistle?”

Artimus shot the youth a discouraging glare. Kurgan looked away.

Boras said, “It was not my intention to offend. Messengers have been dispatched to summon all the Heroes of Apocalypse Night. Yourself, Corrin L’Arris, and Jon Stark.” Boras paused and sighed before adding, “Even the cleric Whisper.”

Artimus was surprised. Boras’ thoughts hadn’t betrayed this bit of information until he spoke it aloud. Obviously, the young cleric didn’t like Whisper. That wasn’t hard to understand. Boras, like King Artphaelon

himself, was a disciple of the generally serious Holy Order of the Sun. Whisper, on the other hand, was an adherent of Nuade, the carefree Goddess of Love. More to the point, Whisper had grown increasingly... *eccentric* since Apocalypse Night. Boras was just one of many people who took a disapproving view of her behavior.

Artimus asked, "What about King Artphaelon? Has he not been summoned? He was with us that night."

Boras winced. "Ico was not specific on that point."

"I would have to decline in any event," said the king. "Ico has his state to run, and I have mine."

The Royal Wizard considered his options. It had been a long time since he'd been to Sewert, and he wasn't particularly keen to return. However, he couldn't turn down a sincere request for help. Besides, it would be good to see Corrin and Jon again. And although Whisper was incredibly unlikely to answer the summons, what if she did?

Deciding on his course of action, Artimus nodded to himself. He next bowed to Boras and then the king. "If you'll excuse us, Sire, we'll need to prepare for our departure."

King Artphaelon said, "Give Whisper my regards."

"Naturally." Artimus rose and turned to leave the room. Kurgan rushed out after him.

"We were planning on going to pay respects to my mother tomorrow," Kurgan reminded. "Do you really have to leave for Sewert right now?"

"Most of my life has been 'have to'," Artimus answered. "Your mother can wait. Ico can't."

"I should have known you'd choose him over me," Kurgan said sullenly. "Fine. I'll see you when you get back."

Artimus put his hand on the youth's shoulder. "No, I'll see you in Sewert. You're coming with me. You

didn't think I'd start a new adventure without my only son, did you?"

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