

The Central Kingdoms  
Chronicles: Book One

# The Wizards of Ranaloy

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## 1. WELCOME TO RANALOY

*If I had known where this was going to lead, I'd have kept it to myself. After years of working on the project in secret, I must have been a fool to enter into an open agreement, no matter how desperate my need. I had thought that his obvious lust for power would make perfect leverage to advance my plans with minimal risk, but I underestimated his madness. I consider this a lesson learned.*



The snap of the splintering mast was loud enough for Artimus to hear over the howling wind and wailing sailors. The wizard didn't need much experience at sea to know that this was not good. Without the sails, there was no chance of escaping the giant tentacles.

It had all happened so fast. One minute, the voyage was going smoothly over calm sea, and the next, there was the storm and the sea monster. But wasn't that the way everything had been lately? It was just a few short months ago that Artimus had spent all his time cowering in the tower library. His whole world had been turned upside down on that day they discovered the necromancer. He'd make Thorgils pay for that if nothing else.

At the captain's command, the ship's cannons unloaded a second barrage of lead shot into the body of the great sea monster. They might as well have been firing soap bubbles. In retaliation, the tentacles dragged another half dozen men to their deaths below the waves.

It was time for Artimus to stop feeling sorry for himself and do something. Once upon a time he might have been the sort to remain idle while lives were at stake, but not anymore. He'd come too far and sacrificed too much to surrender now. If he had to fight his way through a kraken to bring justice to Thorgils, so be it.

Artimus pointed his fingers and unleashed the lightning.



Artimus reluctantly descended from his ivory tower, careful to keep one hand on the stair rail. He was naturally clumsy, and his oversized gut made staircases extra tricky. It's hard to know where to put your feet when you can't see them.

The apprentice wizard rarely ventured into the castle proper. If it wasn't for an official summons from the acting prince regent, Artimus would still be in the tower, snacking on wine and cheese with his nose in a book. He typically passed on the boisterous royal breakfast parties. It wasn't that he disliked food – quite the opposite, as his girth would attest. What he disliked was the company. He had never been comfortable around his peers, much less royalty. Whenever possible he avoided things that made him uncomfortable.

He had been an apprentice in Ranaloy's Royal Castle for nearly two years, yet he still felt like an outsider. That wasn't anything new. Everyone else always seemed

so confident in their roles while Artimus always felt like he was on the wrong side of the glass looking in. It was a familiar sensation, and he tried not to let it distress him. He had long ago learned the futility of dwelling on problems he was powerless to change. As a result, he didn't think much of himself at all.

It had been nine months – a lifetime to young Artimus – since King Grath had departed on his pilgrimage, taking Queen Brinsa, half the court, and all one-hundred members of the Royal Guard with him while leaving his nephew, Thorgils Falloe, in charge of the kingdom. His subjects credited Grath with making wise decisions, but this might not be one of them. Thorgils had begun treating this temporary situation as though it were a permanent station. Artimus knew he wasn't alone in wondering whether King Grath would recognize his kingdom when he returned.

Yet it wasn't really Grath that Artimus missed so much, but Grath's Royal Wizard, Trafar. Trafar had been Artimus' mentor and only friend for the past two years, teaching Artimus the basics of magic and its ethical usage. Trafar was smart, patient, wise – by far the most accomplished wizard in the entire Central Kingdoms. It was said that he had won the last great battle of the Trifold War single-handedly by exterminating the last of the Dragoneers. (Artimus assumed this rumor was true. Trafar never spoke about the Trifold War, and Artimus was too timid to ask.) Artimus knew that he was both lucky and unworthy to be Trafar's apprentice. If he tried for two centuries, he'd never be a fraction of the mage Trafar was.

Why Trafar would ever accept Artimus as an apprentice was still a mystery to him. He was keenly aware of his physical limitations. Magic, specifically fire

magic, was his only talent, but he couldn't even say that he was the second best magician in the royal household. That would be Trafar's first apprentice. Yurie was far more skilled than he was and relished reminding Artimus of this fact.

Artimus was absentmindedly considering whether he would ever replace Yurie as Trafar's "best" apprentice when he stepped into the Great Hall.

"Well, well. Congratulations for being on time, Artimus," Thorgils said with his typical arrogance. "I had begun to fear that Yurie failed to deliver my message." From Thorgils' inflection, Artimus was certain that he had somehow disappointed the prince regent by responding to his orders. This didn't unduly bother Artimus; he couldn't remember a time he actually pleased Thorgils. He was reasonably certain that it wasn't possible.

Wearing his favorite purple tunic, Thorgils occupied Grath's throne at the far end of Royal Castle's Great Hall. The imposing man-at-arms, Kerrigan, stood at attention by Thorgils' side. The giant, never more than a heartbeat away from his employer, was just one of many new faces that now filled Thorgils' royal court. (In fact, only Kerrigan's face was new. The rest of him was hidden under a shiny metal suit of armor identical to the dozen others lining the Hall's walls. Thorgils gave away Grath's property as though it was his.) The two newest faces belonged to a mismatched pair of men now standing before the throne.

The first of Thorgils' guests couldn't have been much older than Artimus himself, although his humorless, haggard expression gave the impression of someone far more advanced in years. Over his simple traveler's outfit, he wore the loose-fitting vestments of a cleric of

the Holy Order of the Sun, the predominant religion of the Central Kingdoms. The second guest was notably older. His worn suit of armor was either spotted with bloodstains or pitted with rust, perhaps both. Long, narrow spikes jutted up from the armor's pauldrons, reminding Artimus of a sea urchin.

"As I was saying, gentlemen," Thorgils continued nonchalantly, "one of the court's wizards will accompany you on your task. Talas and Silas, may I introduce Artimus, hand-chosen apprentice to the legendary wizard Trafar."

Artimus nodded to Talas, the cleric, and Silas, the warrior, but said nothing. His throat had gone suddenly dry as his body diverted that moisture to dampen the palms of his hands. Talas returned Artimus' nod with a gentle smile. Silas just stared.

"Artimus will be your guide to Ranaloy," said Thorgils. "If you have any questions about our kingdom or its people, he can provide answers. I'm sure his company will be invaluable to your task, won't it, Artimus?"

Artimus opened his mouth to reply before realizing that Thorgils' question had been rhetorical. He was acutely aware that Silas had noticed. This intensified his embarrassment.

"Now, in addition to the payment I have promised, I would like to offer you both your choice of weapon from this table." Thorgils led the group to a small table against a wall where an assortment of high-quality weapons and equipment had been laid out. "Please consider this gift a token of royal appreciation for your assistance in our time of need. I hope that it will smooth your, ah, investigation."

Before Thorgils finished speaking, Silas abruptly

snatched a large, two-handed axe from the table and gave it a quick chop through the air. Talas declined the offer. “Thank you, but I don’t carry a weapon. I believe they promote an uncivil attitude in –”

“Hey, what’s this engraved in the side of my new axe?” Silas interrupted. He didn’t ask a question so much as demand an answer. Artimus cringed at this breach of decorum. If Artimus spoke out of turn with a haughty tone, he was sure he’d find his quarters reassigned from the tower to the dungeon.

To Artimus’ great amazement, Thorgils ignored Silas’ rudeness. Instead the Prince put on his most charming smile – which reminded Artimus of a used carriage salesman – as he answered the question. “That is the coat of arms of the Hoppe family. Our dear Queen Brinsa was born to the house of Hoppe, and these weapons were wedding gifts for which I have finally found a good use.”

Silas nodded, but it was evident to all as he resumed swinging the axe through empty air that he wasn’t really paying attention anymore. Thorgils might be able to dismiss Silas’ boorish behavior, but how could he expect Artimus to assist such an uncouth individual? The station of second apprentice wizard may not be equal to a prince, but it should demand *some* respect.

If Thorgils recognized Silas’ disinterest, he gave no sign. He handed Talas a rolled scroll. “I also present to you this writ. Show the writ to any of my subjects from whom you need support, and it will lend the weight of the crown to your request.”

Thorgils gave Talas no time to inspect the writ before continuing. “This matter is of the highest importance, of course. I expect you will leave for Minionburg immediately. If you need anything else before departing

the castle, Artimus can arrange it. I wish both of you luck in your efforts and look forward to a swift resolution to our problem.” It was clear to Artimus that the change in Thorgils’ tone indicated this to be a dismissal.

Minionburg? That backwoods mining town was no place for a citified wizard. Thorgils had spent lavishly on hiring new soldiers to replace those Grath had taken with him. Couldn’t any of them be spared for this task? Surely there must someone in Herf better suited to play tour guide than Artimus. In the two years he’d lived here, he’d barely been outside the castle wall.

Oh, well. There was nothing to be done but as Thorgils instructed. If Artimus was going to be spending the day riding to Minionburg, he’d better start making preparations. He had three lunches to pack, and he probably should ask his new traveling companions if they were going to be wanting something to eat, too.

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