

The Central Kingdoms
Chronicles: Book Three

A Quest Before Dying

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1. THE BEGINNING IS THE END

I once thought it would be enough to kill everyone in the world, but I now see that I was shortsighted. I learned our world is only one reality in an infinite number of co-existing realities. If I truly want to bring peace to mankind, I must find a way to destroy the multiverse itself. This is my new goal.



Artimus opened his eyes to see that his dreams had died. His breath came in ragged gasps; to his ears, it sounded like the scraping of a stone crypt lid sliding open and closed. He suspected that was close to the truth. He should probably be glad to be alive. He wasn't.

They had failed. *He* had failed. He'd been blind to the truth. Worse, he'd been weak when it mattered most. Talas had gone into combat alone. Unarmed, unafraid, the monk had faced down humanity's greatest threat, and all Artimus could do was watch. Talas had died a cruel death. Despite what the bards said, courage alone wasn't enough to defeat evil.

At that moment, lying in a pool of his own blood, Artimus made a vow. He would not rest until he had avenged the deaths of his friends. Whatever the cost, whatever the sacrifice, he *would* be victorious. Even if it

took centuries, humanity would be avenged. Artimus swore it.



Time seemed to stand still as the Army of Verit-Kin and the army of the dead faced each other across the yawning divide of the no-man's-land. Until a moment ago, the two sides had been separated by the magical Great Barrier Flame. For the better part of the last century, the Great Barrier had kept the civilization of Verit-Kin safe from the undead roaming the land to their south, a land now known only as The Blackened Wastes. But that time was past. The flame, having steadily dimmed in recent months, had now flickered out entirely.

It was the living who launched the first attack. On command, their archers released a fusillade of flaming arrows that fell like a hellish rain on the undead army. The arrows had little effect. Few of the soldiers in the unliving army had any fleshy bits that could be pierced or burned away. They didn't need muscles or brains. They were animated by the dark forces of the necromancer Kurse and his Grip of Control.

Spurred into action, the undead army lurched forward in a macabre mimicry of human locomotion. The human soldiers set their pikes and shields against the enemy advance. The humans trusted that their superior discipline and tactics might win the day. Artimus knew better. He'd seen this too many times before in his long life.

The aged wizard tugged on his long, silver beard as he watched the opening of the battle from the safety of his library. His remote viewing spell gave him a close-up

view of the action. As a younger man, he would have been eager to be on the field amid the carnage. He'd long outgrown that desire as his fears had become realities. He was too old for a lot of things, but he would never be too old to be afraid.

The undead pushed forward, ignoring the pikes and overpowering the shields as they surged mindlessly ahead with their supernatural stamina. The humans responded with force. They unleashed their axes and swords in a flurry of aimed and determined blows. Zombie heads and limbs went flying. The first wave of undead was chewed up by a grinding maw of steel.

Though the remote sensor was visual only, Artimus imagined he could hear a cheer of victory from the defenders. He shook his head at their naivete. They were not prepared for what was to happen next.

As the wizard watched, a zombie's severed hand clawed its way up a human soldier's leg. Elsewhere, a decapitated skull bit through a leather boot. A defender was tripped by a pair of legs unconnected to a torso. Undead soldiers didn't need heads or hearts. They weren't stopped by dismemberment; they were motivated by magic. Even separated from their body, the zombie's individual parts continued the fight. So long as two bones were left connected by any bit of sinew, the fight would never end.

The front line of human defenders was still struggling against the remains of the first wave of undead when the second wave arrived. Many men were caught unprepared and were killed without thought or mercy. Many more were soon surrounded and massacred by the overwhelming numbers. The lucky survivors fell back and reformed their lines.

Artimus paid close attention to what happened next.

As disgusted as he was by the needless death filling his viewing sensor, he leaned forward to get a better look. This was what he had been waiting for.

One by one, the fallen human soldiers began to rise. Some of them were bloody. Some were missing limbs. Most of them looked no worse for wear than their former, still-fighting comrades. The one thing they all had in common was that they were all quite dead. No matter how brave or honorable they had been in life, their traitorous corpses now fought for the enemy.

As Artimus expected, the living soldiers were slow to respond to this new horror. They hesitated as their newly-deceased compatriots approached. Artimus didn't blame them. He knew what they were thinking: Maybe their former companions weren't dead. Maybe they had only been wounded. It had been one thing to fight the remains of a long-dead civilization; it was something else to fight their friends. Artimus knew this well. He focused on the battlefield and tried not to think of his own past.

Wherever he looked, he saw humans putting down their weapons to go to their friends' aid. He had seen this behavior play out many – too many – times before. It was an act of suicide. Kurse used people's compassion against them.

In years past, Artimus may have tried to warn the soldiers, prevent them from making the fatal mistake of compassion. Today, the wizard wasn't trying to save anyone. This time, he was counting on the predictability of human nature. The humans fighting the battle didn't know it, but they were being tested.

The most compassionate were the first to die. Panic began to spread through the ranks as others realized too late what was happening. Some turned to flee. Some

grew wild and undisciplined. Only a small handful of warriors emerged as true champions, able to face the horrible truth of the necromancer's army and redouble their fight. It was for this reason – to test warriors like these – that Artimus had allowed the Great Barrier Flame to fall.

One figure stood out against the melee, a titan of battle. With one sword in each hand, he was a fearless dervish cutting his way through any undead within reach, whether desiccated or newly reanimated. His blades danced in the air, landing precise strikes with lightning speed. Artimus could barely cut a wedge of cheese, but he recognized a master of swordsmanship when he saw one. The man was so efficient in his work that his gleaming armor and fair hair remained spotlessly clean amid a battlefield drenched in the ichor of his fallen opponents. Without a doubt, this warrior could only be the swordsman they called Ico the Immaculate.

Ico's reputation had reached Artimus even in his reclusive hideaway. Word was that the man's vanity matched his talent. Artimus didn't care about personality defects. The wizard was assembling a team of competent fighters, not a tea party. Ico's skill with a sword was exactly what he needed most.

Artimus looked past Ico, scanning the fight for other warriors demonstrating even a fraction of Ico's battlefield skill. The Army of Verit-Kin was faring poorly. By now, the undead had reached the lines of archers. Many of them dropped their bows, choosing to join the squires in a mad scramble to retreat. Some, however, chose to fight, usually with hand axes and mallets.

One hooded archer in particular caught Artimus' attention. He was notably shorter than the men around

him but twice as dangerous. Unlike his comrades, he didn't relinquish his bow in the close quarters fighting. Somehow, he managed to pivot, draw, and fire over and over, delivering a steady stream of arrows with unerring accuracy. Each arrow struck a shoulder or knee where they would do the most damage to the undead. Artimus was impressed by the display of marksmanship, athletic ability, and determination. Like Ico, this archer was exactly the type of man the wizard was looking for.

Artimus had found two champions to join his cause, but he'd need as many as he could get. He adjusted his telescopic-vision sensor to search for any others worthy of recruiting. What he saw was not encouraging. Although the undead never tired, the humans were growing exhausted, both physically and emotionally. Each promising warrior he spotted soon fell in battle. The fight was becoming a rout.

He was about to give up the search when he spotted a lone, unarmed soldier surrounded by a dozen undead. Another dozen shattered bodies lay at his feet. Any reasonable oddsmaker would have expected the unarmed man to have died long before, yet he fought on. He sidestepped attack after attack, gracefully dodging punches strong enough to take his head off. Whenever the opportunity presented itself, he grabbed an opponent's overextended limb and snapped it off, adding it to the growing pile on the ground. The longer Artimus watched, the more impressed he became. Yes, this warrior would do too.

That made three champions: a swordsman, an archer, and a martial artist. Artimus was gleeful. The test had been a complete success! Finding three was more than he could have dreamed for. Dare he let himself hope? Maybe this plan *could* succeed where so many had failed

before.

There was no point in delaying. He dispelled his viewing sensor and walked to a large map of the region spread across a table. With great care, he began casting the intricate spell that would restore the Great Barrier Flame.

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