



A
JOUST
OF
KNIGHTS

BOOK #16 IN THE SORCERER'S RING

MORGAN RICE

A JOUST OF KNIGHTS

(BOOK #16 IN THE SORCERER'S RING)

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About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising sixteen books (and counting); of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising eleven books (and counting); and of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting). Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 20 languages.

Morgan loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.morganricebooks.com to join the email list, receive a free book, receive free giveaways, download the free app, get the latest exclusive news, connect on Facebook and Twitter, and stay in touch!

Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

“A spirited fantasy that weaves elements of mystery and intrigue into its story line. *A Quest of Heroes* is all about the making of courage and about realizing a life purpose that leads to growth, maturity, and excellence....For those seeking meaty fantasy adventures, the protagonists, devices, and action provide a vigorous set of encounters that focus well on Thor's evolution from a dreamy child to a young adult facing impossible odds for survival....Only the beginning of what promises to be an epic young adult series.”

--*Midwest Book Review* (D. Donovan, eBook Reviewer)

“THE SORCERER’S RING has all the ingredients for an instant success: plots, counterplots, mystery, valiant knights, and blossoming relationships replete with broken hearts, deception and betrayal. It will keep you entertained for hours, and will satisfy all ages. Recommended for the permanent library of all fantasy readers.”

--*Books and Movie Reviews*, Roberto Mattos

“Rice’s entertaining epic fantasy [THE SORCERER’S RING] includes classic traits of the genre—a strong setting, highly inspired by ancient Scotland and its history, and a good sense of court intrigue.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“I loved how Morgan Rice built Thor’s character and the world in which he lived. The landscape and the creatures that roamed it were very well described...I enjoyed [the plot]. It was short and sweet....There were just the right amount of minor characters, so I didn’t get confused. There were adventures and harrowing moments, but the action depicted wasn’t overly grotesque. The book would be perfect for a teen reader... The beginnings of something remarkable are there...”

--*San Francisco Book Review*

“In this action-packed first book in the epic fantasy Sorcerer's Ring series (which is currently 14 books strong), Rice introduces readers to 14-year-old Thorgrin "Thor" McLeod, whose dream is to join the Silver Legion, the elite knights who serve the king.... Rice's writing is solid and the premise intriguing.”

--*Publishers Weekly*

“[A QUEST OF HEROES] is a quick and easy read. The ends of chapters make it so that you have to read what happens next and you don’t want to put it down. There are some typos in the book and some names are messed up, but this does not distract from the overall story. The end of the book made me want to get the next book immediately and that is what I did. All nine of the Sorcerer’s Ring series can currently be purchased on the Kindle store and *A Quest of Heroes* is currently free to get you started! If you are looking for a something quick and fun to read while on vacation this book will do nicely.”

--*FantasyOnline.net*

Books by Morgan Rice

THE SORCERER'S RING

- A QUEST OF HEROES (Book #1)
- A MARCH OF KINGS (Book #2)
- A FATE OF DRAGONS (Book #3)
- A CRY OF HONOR (Book #4)
- A VOW OF GLORY (Book #5)
- A CHARGE OF VALOR (Book #6)
- A RITE OF SWORDS (Book #7)
- A GRANT OF ARMS (Book #8)
- A SKY OF SPELLS (Book #9)
- A SEA OF SHIELDS (Book #10)
- A REIGN OF STEEL (Book #11)
- A LAND OF FIRE (Book #12)
- A RULE OF QUEENS (Book #13)
- AN OATH OF BROTHERS (Book #14)
- A DREAM OF MORTALS (Book #15)
- A JOUST OF KNIGHTS (Book #16)

THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY

- ARENA ONE: SLAVERSUNNERS (Book #1)
- ARENA TWO (Book #2)

THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS

- TURNED (Book #1)
- LOVED (Book #2)
- BETRAYED (Book #3)
- DESTINED (Book #4)
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- BETROTHED (Book #6)
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CHAPTER ONE

Thorgrin stood at the bow of the sleek ship, gripping the rail, his hair pushed back by the wind, and he stared into the horizon with a deepening sense of foreboding. Their ship, taken from the pirates, was sailing as fast as the winds could carry it, Elden, O'Connor, Matus, Reece, Indra, and Selese working the sails, Angel standing by his side, and Thor, as eager as he was, knew they could not go any faster. Yet still, he willed it to be so. After all this time, he finally felt with certainty that Guwayne lay just ahead, just past the horizon, on the Isle of Light. And with equal certainty, he sensed that Guwayne was in danger.

Thor did not understand how it could be so. After all, the last time he had left them, Guwayne had been safely on the Isle of Light, under Ragon's protection, a sorcerer as powerful as his brother. Argon was the most powerful sorcerer Thorgrin had ever known—had even protected the entire Ring—and Thor did not know how any harm could ever come to Guwayne while under Ragon's protection.

Unless there was some power out there that Thorgrin had never heard of, a power of a dark sorcerer's which could match even Ragon's. Could it be that some realm existed, some dark force, some evil sorcerer, of which he knew nothing?

But why would they target his son?

Thor thought back to the day he had fled the Isle of Light in such a hurry, under the spell of his dream, so driven to leave the place at the crack of dawn. Looking back, Thor realized he had been deceived by some dark force trying to lure him away from his son. It was only thanks to Lycoples, who still circled his ship, screeching, disappearing on the horizon and coming back again, that he had turned back for the Isle, was finally heading in the right direction. The signs, Thor realized, had been in front of his face the whole time. How had he ignored them? What dark force was leading him astray to begin with?

Thor recalled the price he'd had to pay: the demons released from hell, the dark lord's curse that each would mean a curse on his head. He knew that more curses, more trials lay before him, and he felt certain this had been one of them. What other tests, he wondered, lay before him? Would he ever get his son back?

"Don't worry," came a sweet voice.

Thor turned and looked down to see Angel tugging on his shirt.

"Everything will be okay," she added with a smile.

Thor smiled down at her and laid a hand on her head, reassured by her presence as always. He had come to love Angel as he would a daughter, the daughter he never had. He took reassurance in her presence.

"And if it's not," she added with a smile, "I'll take care of them!"

She proudly raised the small bow that O'Connor had carved for her, and showed Thor how she could pull back the arrow. Thor smiled, amused, as she raised the bow to her chest, shakily placed a small wooden arrow on it, and began to pull back the string. She released the bow, and her small wooden arrow went flying, shakily, overboard and out into the ocean.

"Did I kill a fish!?" she asked excitedly as she ran to the rail and looked over with glee.

Thor stood there, looking down into the foaming waters of the sea, and was not so sure. But he smiled all the same.

“I am sure you did,” he said, reassuringly. “Perhaps even a shark.”

Thor heard a distant screech, and he was suddenly on alert again. His entire body froze as he grabbed the hilt of his sword and looked out over the water, studying the horizon.

The thick gray clouds slowly cleared, and as they did, they revealed a horizon which made Thor’s heart drop: in the distance, black plumes of smoke rose into the sky. As more clouds cleared, Thor could see that they arose from a distant isle—not just any isle, but an island with steep cliffs, rising right up to the sky, a broad plateau at its top. An isle he could mistake for no other.

The Isle of Light.

Thor felt a pain in his chest as he saw a sky black with evil creatures, resembling gargoyles, circling what remained of the isle, like vultures, their screeches filling the air. There was an army of them, and below them, the entire isle was up in flames. Not a corner of it was left unscathed.

“FASTER!” Thor shouted, yelling at the wind, knowing it was futile. It was the most helpless feeling of his life.

But there was nothing more he could do. He watched the flames, the smoke, the monsters departing, heard Lycoples screeching above, and he knew it was too late. Nothing could have survived. Anything left on the isle—Ragon, Guwayne, anything at all—would surely, without a doubt, be dead.

“NO!” Thorgrin screamed, cursing the heavens, the ocean spray hitting his face as it carried him, too late, to the isle of death.

CHAPTER TWO

Gwendolyn stood alone, back in the Ring, in her mother's castle, and she looked about at her surroundings and realized something was not quite right. The castle was abandoned, unfurnished, all its belongings stripped away; its windows were gone, the beautiful stained glass that had once adorned them lost, leaving nothing but cutouts in the stone, the sunset light streaming in. Dust swirled in the air, and this place felt as if it hadn't been inhabited in a thousand years.

Gwen looked out and saw the landscape of the Ring, a place she had once known and loved with all her heart, now barren, twisted, grotesque. As if nothing good were left alive in the world.

"My daughter," came a voice.

Gwendolyn turned and was shocked to find her mother standing there, looking back, her face drawn and sickly, hardly the mother she once knew and remembered. It was the mother she remembered from her deathbed, the mother who looked as if she had been aged too much for one lifetime.

Gwen felt a lump in her throat and she realized, despite all that had gone about between them, how much she missed her. She did not know if it was her she missed, or just seeing her family, something familiar, the Ring. What she would give to be home again, to be back in the familiar.

"Mother," Gwen replied, hardly believing the sight before her.

Gwen reached out for her, and as she did, she suddenly found herself somewhere else, standing on an island, at the edge of a cliff, the island charred, having just been burned to ashes. The heavy smell of smoke and sulfur hung in the air, burned her nostrils. She faced the isle, and as the waves of ashes dissipated in the wind, she looked out and saw a bassinet made of gold, charred, the only object in this landscape of embers and ash.

Gwen's heart pounded as she stepped forward, so nervous to see if her son was in there, if he was okay. A part of her was elated to reach in and hold him, to clutch him at her chest and never let him go again. But another part dreaded he might not be there—or worse, that he could be dead.

Gwen rushed forward and leaned down and looked in the bassinet, and her heart dropped to see it was empty.

"GUWAYNE!" she cried out, in anguish.

Gwen heard a screech, high up in the air, matching hers, and she looked up and saw an army of black creatures, resembling gargoyles, flying away. Her heart stopped as she saw, in the talons of the last one, a baby, dangling, crying. He was being carried away into skies of gloom, hoisted by an army of darkness.

"NO!" Gwen shrieked.

Gwen woke screaming. She sat up in bed, looking everywhere for Guwayne, reaching out to save him, to clutch him to her chest.

But he was nowhere to be found.

Gwendolyn sat in bed, breathing hard, trying to figure out where she was. The dim light of dawn spread through the windows, and it took her several moments to realize where she was: the Ridge. The King's castle.

Gwen felt something on her palm and she looked down to see Krohn licking her hand, then resting his head on her lap. She stroked his head as she sat on the edge of the bed, breathing hard, slowly orienting herself, the weight of her dream upon her.

Guwayne, she thought. The dream had felt so real. It was more, she knew, than a dream—it had been a vision. Guwayne, wherever he was, was in trouble. He was being abducted by some dark force. She could feel it.

Gwendolyn stood, agitated. More than ever, she felt an urgency to find her son, to find her husband. She wanted more than anything to see and to hold him. But she knew it was not meant to be.

Wiping away tears, Gwen wrapped her silk gown about herself, quickly crossed the room, the cobblestone smooth and cold on her bare feet, and lingered by the tall arched window. She pushed back the stained glass pane, and as she did, it let in the muted light of dawn, the first sun rising, flooding the countryside in scarlet. It was breathtaking. Gwen looked out, taking in the Ridge, the immaculate capital city and the endless countryside all around it, rolling hills and lush vineyards, the most abundance she had ever seen in one place. Beyond that, the sparkling blue of the lake lit up the morning—and beyond that, the peaks of the Ridge, shaped in a perfect circle, encircled the place, shrouded in mist. It seemed like a place to which there could come no harm.

Gwen thought of Thorgrin, of Guwayne, somewhere beyond those peaks. Where were they? Would she ever see them again?

Gwen went to the cistern, splashed water on her face, and dressed herself quickly. She knew she would not find Thorgrin and Guwayne by sitting here in this room, and she felt more than ever that she needed to. If anyone could help her, perhaps it was the King. He must have some way.

Gwen recalled her conversation with him, as they had walked the peaks of the Ridge and watched Kendrick depart, recalled the secrets he had revealed to her. His dying. The Ridge dying. There was more, too, more secrets he was going to reveal—but they had gotten interrupted. His advisors had whisked him away on urgent business, and as he'd left he'd promised to reveal more—and to ask her a favor. What was the favor? she wondered. What could he possibly want of her?

The King had asked for her to meet him in his throne room when the sun broke, and Gwen now hurried to get dressed, knowing she was already late. Her dreams had left her groggy.

As she rushed across the room, Gwendolyn felt a hunger pain, the starvation from the Great Waste still taking its toll, and she glanced over at the table of delicacies laid out for her—breads, fruits, cheeses, puddings—and she quickly grabbed some, eating as she went. She grabbed more than she needed, and as she went, she reached down and fed half of what she had to Krohn, who whined by her side, snatching it from her palm, eager to catch up. She was so grateful for this food, this shelter, these lavish quarters—feeling in some ways as if she were back in King's Court, in the castle of her upbringing.

Guards snapped to attention as Gwen exited the chamber, pushing open the heavy oak door. She strode past them, down the dimly lit stone corridors of the castle, torches still burning from the night.

Gwen reached the end of the corridor and ascended a set of spiral stone stairs, Krohn on her heels, until she reached the upper floors, where she knew the King's throne room to be, already becoming familiar with this castle. She hurried down another hall, and was about to pass through an arched opening in the stone when she sensed motion out of the corner of her eye. She flinched, surprised to see a person standing in the shadows.

“Gwendolyn?” he said, his voice smooth, too polished, emerging from the shadows with a smug, small smile on his face.

Gwendolyn blinked, taken aback, and it took her moment to remember who he was. She had been introduced to so many people these last few days, it had all become quite a blur.

But this was one face she could not forget. It was, she realized, the King’s son, the other twin, the one with the hair, who had spoken out against her.

“You’re the King’s son,” she said, remembering aloud. “The third eldest.”

He grinned, a sly grin which she did not like, as he took another step forward.

“The second eldest, actually,” he corrected. “We are twins, but I came first.”

Gwen looked him over as he took a step closer, and noticed he was immaculately dressed and shaven, his hair coiffed, smelling like perfume and oil, dressed in the finest clothes she’d seen. He wore a smug look, and he reeked of arrogance and self-importance.

“I prefer not to be thought of as the twin,” he continued. “I am my own man. Mardig is my name. It is just my lot in life to be born a twin, one I could not control. The lot, one could say, of crowns,” he concluded, philosophically.

Gwen did not like being in his presence, still smarting from his treatment the night before, and she felt Krohn tense up at her side, the hairs on his neck rising as he rubbed up against her leg. She felt impatient to know what he wanted.

“Do you always linger in the shadows of these corridors?” she asked.

Mardig smirked as he stepped closer, a bit too close for her.

“It is my castle, after all,” he replied, territorially. “I’ve been known to wander about it.”

“*Your* castle?” she asked. “And not your father’s?”

His expression darkened.

“Everything in time,” he replied cryptically, and took another step forward.

Gwendolyn found herself involuntarily taking a step back, not liking the feel of his presence, as Krohn began to snarl.

Mardig looked down at Krohn disparagingly.

“You know that animals do not sleep in our castle?” he replied.

Gwen frowned, annoyed.

“Your father had no qualms.”

“My father does not enforce the rules,” he replied. “I do. And the King’s guard is under my command.”

She frowned, frustrated.

“Is that why you’ve stopped me here?” she asked, annoyed. “To enforce animal control?”

He frowned back, realizing, perhaps, that he’d met his match. He stared at her, his eyes locking on hers, as if summing her up.

“There is not a woman in the Ridge who does not long for me,” he said. “And yet I see no passion in your eyes.”

Gwen gaped at him, horrified, as she finally realized what this was all about.

“*Passion?*” she repeated, mortified. “And why would I? I am married, and the love of my life will soon return to my side.”

Mardig laughed aloud.

“Is that so?” he asked. “From what I hear, he is long dead. Or so far lost to you, he will never return.”

Gwendolyn scowled, her anger mounting.

“And even if he should never return,” she said, “I would never be with another. And certainly not you.”

His expression darkened.

She turned to go, but he reached out and grabbed her arm. Krohn snarled.

“I don’t ask for what I want here,” he said. “I take it. You are in a foreign kingdom, at the mercy of a foreign host. It would best be wise for you to oblige your captors. After all, without our hospitality, you will be cast into the waste. And there are a great many unfortunate circumstances which can accidentally befall a guest—even with the most well-intentioned of hosts.”

She scowled, having seen too many real threats in her life to be afraid of his petty warnings.

“Captors?” she said. “Is that what you call us? I am a free woman, in case you haven’t noticed. I can leave here right now if I choose.”

He laughed, an ugly sound.

“And where would you go? Back into the Waste?”

He smiled and shook his head.

“You might be technically free to go,” he added. “But let me ask you: when the world is a hostile place, where does that leave you?”

Krohn snarled viciously, and Gwen could feel him ready to pounce. She shook Mardgi’s hand off of her arm indignantly, and reached down and laid a hand on Krohn’s head, holding him back. And then, as she glared back at Mardgi, she had a sudden insight.

“Tell me something, Mardig,” she said, her voice hard and cold. “Why is it you are not out there, fighting with your brothers in the desert? Why is it that you are the only one who remains behind? Is it fear that drives you?”

He smiled, but beneath his smile she could sense cowardice.

“Chivalry is for fools,” he replied. “Convenient fools, that pave the way for the rest of us to have whatever we want. Dangle the term ‘chivalry,’ and they can be used like puppets. I myself cannot be used so easily.”

She looked at him, disgusted.

“My husband and our Silver would laugh at a man like you,” she said. “You wouldn’t last two minutes in the Ring.”

Gwen looked from him to the entrance he was blocking.

“You have two choices,” she said. “You can move out of my way, or Krohn here can have the breakfast he so heartily desires. I think you are about the perfect size.”

He glanced down at Krohn, and she saw his lip quiver. He stepped aside.

But she did not go just yet. Instead, she stepped up, close to him, sneering, wanting to have her point made.

“You might be in command of your little castle,” she snarled darkly, “but do not forget that you speak to a Queen. A *free* Queen. I will never answer to you, never answer to anyone else as long as I live. I am through with that. And that makes me very dangerous—far more dangerous than you.”

The Prince stared back, and to her surprise, he smiled.

“I like you, Queen Gwendolyn,” he replied. “Much more than I thought.”

Gwendolyn, heart pounding, watched him turn and walk away, slithering back into the blackness, disappearing down the corridor. As his footsteps echoed and faded away, she wondered: what dangers lurked in this court?

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