

A dramatic sunset over a rocky coastline. The sun is a bright, glowing orb in the upper left, casting a golden light across the sky and reflecting on the water. The foreground and middle ground are dominated by dark, jagged rock formations and mountains in silhouette, creating a stark contrast against the warm, orange and yellow hues of the sunset. The water is dark, with shimmering highlights from the sun's reflection.

MORGAN RICE

A
DREAM
OF
MORTALS

BOOK #15 IN THE SORCERER'S RING

A dream OF mortals

(Book #15 in the Sorcerer's Ring)

Morgan Rice

About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling author of THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, a young adult series comprising eleven books (and counting); the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); and the #1 bestselling epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising fifteen books (and counting).

Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations of the books are available in German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Chinese, Swedish, Dutch, Turkish, Hungarian, Czech and Slovak (with more languages forthcoming).

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*

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)

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)
- DESIRED (Book #5)
- BETROTHED (Book #6)
- VOWED (Book #7)
- FOUND (Book #8)
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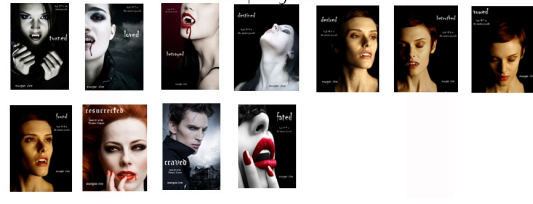
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THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY



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[CHAPTER ONE](#)
[CHAPTER TWO](#)
[CHAPTER THREE](#)
[CHAPTER FOUR](#)
[CHAPTER FIVE](#)
[CHAPTER SIX](#)
[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)
[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)
[CHAPTER NINE](#)
[CHAPTER TEN](#)
[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)
[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY ONE](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY TWO](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY THREE](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY SIX](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY NINE](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY ONE](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY TWO](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY THREE](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR](#)

CHAPTER ONE

Gwendolyn slowly opened her eyes, caked with sand, the effort taking all of her strength. She could only open them a sliver, and she squinted out at a world that was blurry, filled with sunlight. Somewhere up above, the glaring desert suns shone down, creating a world that blinded her with white. Gwen did not know if she were dead or alive—she suspected the latter.

Blinded by the light, Gwen was too weak to turn her head left or right. *Was this what it was like, she wondered, to be dead?*

Suddenly, a shadow was cast over her face, and she blinked to see a black hood above her, obscuring the face of a small creature, its face hidden in darkness. All Gwen could see were its beady yellow eyes, staring down at her, examining her as if she were some object lost on the desert floor. It made a strange squeaking noise, and Gwen realized it was speaking in a language she did not understand.

There came a shuffling of feet, a small cloud of dust, and two more of these creatures appeared over her, faces covered with black hoods, all their eyes aglow, brighter than the sun. They squeaked, seeming to communicate with one another. Gwen could not tell what sort of creatures they were, and she wondered once again if she were alive, or if this were all a dream. Was it another one of the hallucinations she'd suffered during these past days in the desert heat?

Gwen felt a poke on her shoulder, and she opened her eyes again to see one of the creatures reaching down with its staff and jabbing her, presumably testing to see if she were still alive. Gwen wanted to reach up and swat it away, annoyed—but was too weak for even that. She welcomed the sensation, though; it made her feel that maybe, just maybe, she was alive after all.

Gwen suddenly felt long, thin claws wrap around her wrists, her arms, and felt herself being picked up, hoisted onto some sort of cloth, perhaps a canvas. She felt herself being dragged across the desert floor, sliding backwards beneath the sun. She had no idea if she were being dragged off to her death, but she was too weak to care. She looked up and saw the world go by, the sky bouncing as she did, the suns as blazing hot and brilliant as ever. She had never felt so weak or dehydrated in her life; each breath felt as if she were breathing fire.

Gwen suddenly felt a cold liquid run down her lips, and she saw one of the creatures leaning over her, pouring water from a sack. It took all of her energy just to manage to stick out her tongue. The cool water trickled down her throat, and it felt as if she were swallowing fire. She hadn't realized her throat could become this dry.

Gwendolyn drank greedily, relieved that at least these creatures were friendly. The creature, though, stopped pouring after a few seconds, pulling back the sack.

"More," Gwen tried to whisper—but the words wouldn't come out, her voice still too raspy.

Gwen continued to be dragged and she tried to muster the energy to break free, to reach out and grab that sack, to drink all the water that was in there. But she did not have the energy to even lift an arm.

Gwen was dragged and dragged, her legs and feet hitting bumps and rocks beneath, and it seemed to go on forever. After a while she could no longer tell how much time had passed. It felt like days. The only sound she heard was that of the desert wind ripping through, carrying more dust and heat.

Gwen felt more cold water on her lips, and drank more this time, until it was pulled away. She opened her eyes a bit further, and as she saw the creature pull it away, she realized that he was feeding her slowly so as not to give her too much at once. The water trickling down her throat did not feel quite as harsh this time, and she felt the hydration rushing to her veins. She realized how desperately

she needed it.

“Please,” Gwen said, “more.”

The creature, instead, poured some water over her face, her eyes, and the cool water felt so refreshing as it trickled down her hot skin. It took some of the dust off of her eyelids, and she was able to open them a bit more—enough to at least see what was happening.

All around her Gwen saw more of these creatures, dozens of them, shuffling along the desert floor in their black cloaks and hoods, speaking amongst themselves with strange squeaking noises. She looked over just enough to see them carrying several more bodies, and she felt an immense sense of relief to recognize the bodies of Kendrick, Sandara, Aberthol, Brandt, Atme, Illepra, the baby, Steffer, Arliss, several Silver, and Krohn—perhaps a dozen or so in all. They were all being dragged alongside her, and Gwen couldn't tell if they were alive or dead. From the way they all lay, all so limp, she could only assume they were dead.

Her heart sank, and Gwen prayed to God that wasn't the case. Yet she was pessimistic. After all, who could have survived out here? She was still not entirely sure that *she* had survived.

As she continued to be dragged, Gwen closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, she realized that she had fallen asleep. She did not know how much more time had passed, but it was now late in the day, the two suns low in the sky. She was still being dragged. She wondered who these creatures were; she assumed them to be desert nomads of some sort, perhaps some tribe who had somehow managed to survive out here. She wondered how they'd found her, where they were taking her. On the one hand, she was so grateful that they had saved her life; on the other, who knew if they were taking her to be killed? To be a meal for the tribe?

Either way, she was too weak and exhausted to do anything about it.

Gwen opened her eyes, she did not know how much later, startled by a rustling sound. At first it sounded like a distant thorn bush whirling across the desert floor. But as the sound grew louder, more incessant, she knew it was something else. It sounded like a sandstorm. A raging, incessant sandstorm.

As they neared it and the people carrying her turned, Gwen looked over and was afforded a view unlike any she had ever seen. It was a view that made her stomach churn, especially as she realized they were approaching it: there, perhaps fifty feet away, was a wall of raging sand, rising right up into the sky, so high she could not see if it had an end. The wind blew violently through it, like a contained tornado, and the sand churned violently in the air, so thick she could not see through it.

They headed right for this wall of raging sand, the noise so loud it was deafening, and she wondered why. It seemed like they were approaching instant death.

“Turn back!” Gwen tried to say.

But her voice was hoarse, too weak for anyone to hear, especially over the wind. She doubted they'd listen to her, even if they had heard her.

Gwen began to feel the sand scraping her skin as they neared the churning sand wall, and suddenly two creatures approached her and draped a long, heavy sheet over her, draping it over her body, covering her face. She realized they were shielding her.

A moment later, Gwen found herself in a violent wall of churning sand.

As they entered it, the noise was so loud, Gwen felt as if she would go deaf, and she wondered how she could possibly survive this. Gwen realized right away that this canvas over her was saving her; it protected her face and skin from being torn apart by the raging wall of sand. The nomads marched on their heads down low against the sand wall, as if they had done this many times before. They continued to yank her through it, and as the sand raged all around her, and Gwen wondered if it would ever have an end.

Then, finally, there came silence. Sweet, sweet silence, like she had never savored before. Two nomads removed the canvas from her, and Gwen saw they had cleared the sand wall, had emerged out

the other side. But the other side of what? she wondered.

Finally, the dragging came to a stop and as it did, all Gwen's questions were answered. They set her down gently, and she lay there, unmoving, looking up at the sky. She blinked several times, trying to comprehend the sight before her.

Slowly, the view before her came into focus. She saw an impossibly high wall made of rock, climbing hundreds of feet into the clouds. The wall stretched in all directions, disappearing into the horizon. At the top of these towering cliffs, Gwen saw ramparts, fortifications, and atop them, thousands of knights wearing armor that shone in the sun.

She could not understand. How could they be here? she wondered. Knights, in the middle of the desert? Where had they taken her?

Then suddenly, with a jolt, she knew. Her heart beat faster as she suddenly realized they had found it, had made it here, all the way across the Great Waste.

It existed, after all.

The Second Ring.

CHAPTER TWO

Angel felt herself plummeting through the air as she dove down, headfirst, for the raging waters of the churning sea below. She could still see Thorgrin's body submerged beneath the water, unconscious, limp, sinking down deeper with every passing moment. She knew that he could be dead within moments, and that if she hadn't dove off the ship when she had, he would certainly have no chance to live.

She was determined to save him—even if it meant her life, even if she died down there with him. She could not really understand it, but she felt an intense connection to Thor, ever since the moment they had first met back on her island. He had been the only one she had ever met who was unafraid of her leprosy, who had given her a hug despite it, who had looked at her as a normal person, and who had never shied away from her for a minute. She felt she owed him a great debt, felt an intense loyalty to him, and she would sacrifice her life for him, whatever the cost.

Angel felt her skin pierced by the icy cold waters as she was submerged. It felt like a million daggers piercing her skin. It was so cold it startled her, and she held her breath as she plunged down, deeper and deeper, opening her eyes in the murky waters and searching for Thorgrin. She barely spotted him in the darkness, sinking lower and lower, and she gave a great kick, again and again, reached out and, using her downward momentum, just grabbed his sleeve.

He was heavier than she thought. She wrapped both arms around him, turned around, and kicked furiously, using all her might to get them to stop descending and instead ascend. Angel wasn't big and she wasn't strong, but she had learned quickly growing up that her legs held a strength that her upper body did not. Her arms were weak from the leprosy but her legs were her gift, stronger than a man's, and she used them now, kicking for her life, swimming upwards toward the surface. If there was one thing she had learned growing up on an island, it was how to swim.

Angel kicked their way out of the murky deep, up higher and higher toward the surface, looking up and seeing sunlight reflected down through the waves above.

Come on! she thought. *Just a few more feet!*

Exhausted, unable to hold her breath much longer, she willed herself to kick harder—and with one last kick, she exploded up to the surface.

Angel came up gasping for air and she brought Thor up with her, her arms wrapped around him, using her legs to keep them afloat, kicking and kicking, holding his head above the surface. He still appeared unconscious to her, and now she worried if he had drowned.

"Thorgrin!" she cried. "Wake up!"

Angel grabbed him from behind, wrapped her arms tight around his stomach, and pulled sharply toward her, again and again, as she had seen one of her leper friends do once when another friend was drowning. She did it now, pulling up into his diaphragm, her little arms shaking as she did.

"Please, Thorgrin," she cried. "Please live! Live for me!"

Angel suddenly heard a gratifying cough, followed by throwing up of water, and she was elated to realize that Thor had come back. He threw up all the sea water as he racked his lungs, coughing up again and again. Angel was flooded with relief.

Even better, Thor seemed to have regained consciousness. The whole ordeal seemed to have finally shaken him from his deep slumber. Maybe, she hoped, he would even be strong enough to fight off these men and help them escape somewhere.

Angel had hardly finished the thought when she suddenly felt a heavy rope land on her head, dropping down from the sky and completely engulfing her and Thorgrin.

She looked up and saw the cutthroats standing over them at the edge of the ship, staring down, grabbing hold of the other end of the rope and yanking it up, hoisting them in as if they were fish. Angel struggled, thrashing at the rope, and she hoped Thor would, too. But while he coughed, Thor still lay there limply, and she could tell he clearly didn't have the strength yet to defend.

Angel felt them slowly hoisted up in the air, higher and higher, water dripping down from the net as the pirates pulled them closer, back to the ship.

"NO!" she yelled, thrashing, trying to break free.

A cutthroat held out a long iron hook, hooked the net, and yanked them with one jerky motion for the deck.

They swung through the air, the cords were cut, and Angel felt herself falling as they landed hard on the deck, dropping a good ten feet and tumbling as they did. Angel's ribs hurt from the impact and she thrashed at the rope, trying to break free.

But it was no use. Within moments several pirates jumped on top of them, pinning her and Thorgrin down and yanking them out. Angel felt several rough hands grab her, and felt her wrists bound behind her back with coarse rope as she was dragged to her feet, dripping wet. She could not even move.

Angel looked over, worried for Thorgrin, and she saw him being bound, too, still out of it, more asleep than awake. They were each dragged together across the deck, too fast, Angel stumbling as they went.

"This will teach you to try to get away from us," a pirate snapped.

Angel looked up and saw before her a wooden door to the lower deck being opened, and she stared into the blackness of the lower holds of the deck. The next thing she knew she and Thor were thrown by the pirates.

Angel felt herself go tumbling as she went flying headfirst into the blackness. She hit her head hard on the wood floor, landing face first, and then felt the weight of Thor's body landing on top of her, the two of them rolling into the blackness.

The wooden door to the deck was slammed from above, blocking out all the light, then locked with a heavy chain, and she lay there, breathing hard in the blackness, wondering where the pirates had thrown her.

At the far end of the hold sunlight suddenly came flooding in and she saw the pirates had opened up a wooden hatch, covered by iron bars. Several faces appeared above, sneering down, some of them spitting, before they walked away. Before they slammed this hatch down, too, Angel heard a reassuring voice in the darkness.

"It's okay. You're not alone."

Angel started, surprised and relieved to hear a voice, and she was shocked and elated as she turned to see all of her friends sitting down there in the blackness, all with their hands bound behind their back. There sat Reece and Selese, Elden and Indra, O'Connor and Matus, all of them captive but alive. She had been so sure they had all been killed at sea, and was flooded with relief.

Yet she was also filled with foreboding: if all these great warriors had been taken prisoner, she thought, what chance did any of them ever have of making it out of here alive?

CHAPTER THREE

Erec sat on the wooden deck of his own ship, his back against a pole, his hands bound behind him and looked out with dismay at the sight before him. The remaining ships of his fleet were spread out before him in the calm ocean waters, all held captive in the night, blockaded by the fleet of a thousand Empire ships. They were all anchored in place, lit up beneath the two full moons, his ships flying the banners of his homeland and Empire ships flying the black-and-gold banners of the Empire. It was a disheartening sight. He had surrendered to spare his men from a certain death—and yet now they were at the mercy of the Empire, common prisoners with no way out.

Erec could see the Empire soldiers occupying each of his ships, as they occupied his, a dozen Empire soldiers standing guard per ship, staring lackadaisically at the ocean. On the decks of his ship Erec could see a hundred men on each, all lined up, bound with their wrists behind their back. On each ship they outnumbered the Empire guards, but clearly the Empire guards were not concerned. With all the men bound, they did not really need *any* men to watch over them, much less a dozen. Erec's men had surrendered, and clearly, with their fleet blockaded, there was nowhere for them to go.

As Erec looked out at the sight before him, he was racked with guilt. He had never surrendered before in his life, and to have to do so now pained him to no end. He had to remind himself he was a commander now, not a mere foot soldier, and he had a responsibility to all of his men. As outnumbered as they'd been, he could not have allowed them to all be killed. Clearly, they'd walked into a trap, thanks to Krov, and fighting at that moment would have been futile. His father had taught him that the first law of being a commander was to know when to fight and when to lay down your arms and choose to fight another day, another way. It was bravado and pride, he'd said, that led to most men's deaths. It was sound advice, but hard advice to follow.

"I myself would have fought," came a voice beside him, sounding like the voice of his conscience.

Erec looked over to see his brother, Strom, bound to a post beside him, looking as unflappable and confident as ever, despite the circumstances.

Erec frowned.

"You would have fought, and all of our men would be dead," Erec replied.

Strom shrugged.

"We will go down either way, my brother," he replied. "The Empire has nothing but cruelty. At least, my way, we would have gone down with glory. Now we will be killed by these men, but it won't be on our feet—it will be on our backs, their swords at our throats."

"Or worse," said one of Erec's commanders, bound to a post beside Strom, "we will be taken as slaves and never live as free men again. Is this what we followed you for?"

"You don't know any of that," Erec said. "No one knows what the Empire will do. At least we are alive. At least we have a chance. The other way would have guaranteed death."

Strom looked at Erec with disappointment.

"It is not a decision our father would have made."

Erec reddened.

"You don't know what our father would have done."

"Don't I?" Strom countered. "I lived with him, grew up with him on the Isles all my life, while you cavorted about the Ring. You barely knew him. And I say our father would have fought."

Erec shook his head.

"These are easy words for a soldier," he countered. "If you were a commander, your words might be quite different. I knew enough about our father to know that he would have saved his men, at any

cost. He was not rash, and not impetuous. He was proud, but not overflowing with pride. Our father *the foot soldier*, in his youth, as you, might have fought; but our father *the King* would have been prudent and lived to fight another day. There are things you will understand, Strom, as you grow up to become a man.”

Strom reddened.

“I am more man than you.”

Erec sighed.

“You don’t really understand what battle means,” he said. “Not until you lose. Not until you watch your men die before you. You have never lost. You have been sheltered on that Isle all your life. And that has formed your hubris. I love you as a brother—but not as a commander.”

They fell into a tense silence, a truce of sorts, as Erec looked up into the night, looking at the endless stars, and took stock of the situation. He truly loved his brother, but so often in life they argued about everything; they just didn’t see two things the same way. Erec gave himself time to cool off, took a deep breath, then finally turned back to Strom.

“I don’t mean for us to surrender,” he added, more calmly. “Not as prisoners, and not as slaves. You must take a broader view: surrendering is sometimes just the first step in battle. You don’t always encounter an enemy with your sword drawn: sometimes the best way to fight him is with open arms. You can always swing the sword later.”

Strom looked at him, puzzled.

“And then how do you plan to get us out of this?” he asked. “We have forfeited our arms. We are captives, bound, unable to move. We are surrounded by a fleet of a thousand ships. We stand no chance.”

Erec shook his head.

“You don’t see the whole picture,” he said. “None of our men are dead. We still have our ships. We may be prisoners, but I see few Empire guards on each of our ships—which means we outnumber them greatly. All that’s needed is a spark to light the fire. We can take them by surprise—and we can escape.”

Strom shook his head.

“We cannot overcome them,” he said. “We are bound, helpless, so the numbers mean nothing. And even if we did, we’d be crushed by the fleet which surrounds us.”

Erec turned, ignoring his brother, not interested in his pessimism. He instead looked over at Alistair, sitting several feet away, bound to a post on his other side. His heart broke as he examined her; she sat there, captive, all thanks to him. For himself, he did not mind being prisoner—that was the price of war. But for her, it broke his heart. He would give anything not to see her like this.

Erec felt so indebted to her; after all, she had saved their lives yet again, back in the Dragon’s Spine, against that sea monster. He knew she was still spent from the effort, knew she was unable to muster any energy. Yet Erec knew that she was their only hope.

“Alistair,” he called out again, as he had all night long, every few minutes. He leaned over and with his foot, he brushed her foot, gently nudging her. He would give anything to undo his binds, to be able to go over to her, to hug her, to free her. It was the most helpless feeling to lay beside her, and to be unable to do anything about it.

“Alistair,” he called out. “Please. It’s Erec. Wake up. I beg you. I need you—we need you.”

Erec waited, as he had all night long, losing hope. He did not know if she would ever return to him after her last exertion.

“*Alistair*,” he pleaded, again and again. “Please. Wake up for me.”

Erec waited, watching her, but she did not move. She lay so still, unconscious, as beautiful as ever in the moonlight. Erec willed for her to come to life.

Erec looked away, lowered his head, and closed his eyes. Perhaps all was lost, after all. There was simply nothing else he could do at this point.

“I’m here,” came a soft voice, ringing through the night.

Erec looked up with hope and turned to see Alistair staring back at him, and his heart beat faster, overwhelmed with love and joy. She looked exhausted, her eyes barely open, as she sleepily stared back at him.

“Alistair, my love,” he said urgently. “I need you. Just this one last time. I can’t do this without you.”

She closed her eyes for a long time, and then opened them, just a bit.

“What do you need?” she asked.

“Our bonds,” he said. “We need you to free us. All of us.”

Alistair closed her eyes again, and a long time elapsed, during which Erec could hear nothing save the wind caressing the ship, the gentle lapping of the waves against the hull. A heavy silence filled the air, and as more time passed, Erec felt sure she would not open them again.

Finally, slowly, Erec watched her open her eyes again.

With what appeared to be a monumental effort, Alistair opened her eyes, lifted her chin, and looked all about the ships, taking stock of everything. He could see her eyes changing colors, glowing a light blue, lighting up the night like two torches.

Suddenly, Alistair’s binds broke. Erec heard them snap in the night, then saw her raise her two palms before her. An intense light shone from them.

A moment later, Erec felt a heat behind his back, along his wrists. They felt impossibly hot, then suddenly, his binds began to loosen. One strip at a time, Erec felt each of his ropes breaking free, until finally he was able to snap them himself.

Erec raised his wrists and examined them in disbelief. He was free. He was truly free.

Erec heard the snapping of cords and looked over to see Strom break free of his binds. The snapping continued, all throughout the ship, and throughout his other ships, and he saw his other men’s bonds breaking, saw his men being freed, one at a time.

They all looked to Erec, and he held a finger to his lips, motioning for them to be quiet. Erec saw the guards had not noticed, all with their backs to them, standing at the rail, jesting with each other and looking at the night. Of course, none of them were on guard.

Erec motioned for Strom and the others to follow, and quietly, Erec leading the way, they all crept forward, heading for the guards.

“Now!” Erec commanded.

He burst into a sprint and they all did the same, rushing forward as one, until they reached the guards. As they got close, some of the guards, alerted by the wood creaking on the deck, spun around and began to draw their swords.

But Erec and the others, all hardened warriors, all desperate for their one chance to survive, beat them to it, moving too quickly through the night. Strom pounced on one and grabbed his wrist before he could swing; Erec reached into the man’s belt, drew his dagger, and cut his throat while Strom snatched the sword. Despite all their differences, the two brothers worked seamlessly together, as they always did, fighting as one.

Erec’s men all snatched weapons from the guards, killing them with their own swords and daggers. Other men simply tackled the guards who moved too slowly, shoving them over the rail, screaming, and sending them into the sea.

Erec looked out at his other ships, and saw his men killing guards left and right.

“Cut the anchors!” Erec commanded.

Up and down his ships his men severed the ropes, keeping them in place, and soon Erec felt the

familiar feeling of his ship rocking beneath him. Finally, they were free.

~~Horns sounded, shouts rang out, and torches were lit up and down ships as the greater Empire fled~~ finally realized what was happening. Erec turned and looked out at the blockade of ships blocking their way to the open sea, and he knew that he had the fight of his life ahead of him.

But he no longer cared. His men were alive. They were free. Now they had a chance. And now, this time, they would go down fighting.

CHAPTER FOUR

Darius felt his face sprayed with blood, and he turned to see a dozen of his men cut down by an Empire soldier riding an immense black horse. The soldier swung a sword larger than any Darius had ever seen, and in one clean sweep he chopped off twelve of their heads.

Darius heard shouts rise up all around him, and he turned in every direction to see his men being cut down everywhere. It was surreal. They swung with great blows, and his men fell by the dozens, then the hundreds—then the thousands.

Darius suddenly found himself standing on a pedestal, and as far as the eye could see lay thousands of corpses. All his people, piled up dead inside the walls of Volusia. There was no one left. Not a single man.

Darius let out a great shout of agony, of helplessness, as he felt himself grabbed from behind by Empire soldiers and dragged off, screaming, into the blackness.

Darius woke with a start, gasping for air, flailing. He looked all around, trying to understand what was happening, what was real and what was a dream. He heard the rustling of chains and as his eyes adjusted in the darkness, he began to realize where the noise was coming from. He looked down to see his ankles shackled with heavy chains. He felt the aches and pains all over his body, the sting of fresh wounds, and he saw his body covered in wounds, dried blood caked all over him. Every movement ached, and he felt as if he had been pummeled by a million men. One of his eyes was swollen nearly shut.

Slowly, Darius turned and surveyed his surroundings. On the one hand he was relieved that it had all been a dream—yet as he took it all in he slowly remembered, and the pain came back. It had been a dream, and yet there had also been much truth in it. There returned to him flashbacks of his battle against the Empire within the gates of Volusia. He recalled the ambush, the gates closing, the troops surrounding them—all of his men being slaughtered. The betrayal.

He struggled hard to bring it all back, and the final thing he remembered, after killing several Empire soldiers, was taking a blow the side of his head from the blunt end of an ax.

Darius reached up, chains rattling, and felt a huge welt on the side of his head, coming all the way down to the swelling in his eye. That had been no dream. That was real.

As it all came back, Darius was flooded with anguish, with regret. His men, all the people he had loved, had been killed. All because of him.

He looked around frantically in the dim light, looking for any sign of any of his men, any sign of survivors. Perhaps many had lived, and had, like him, been taken prisoner.

“Move on!” came a harsh command in the blackness.

Darius felt rough hands pick up him up from beneath his arms, drag him to his feet, then felt a boot kick him in the back of his spine.

He groaned in pain as he stumbled forward, chains rattling, feeling himself go flying into the back of a boy before him. The boy reached back and elbowed Darius in the face, sending him stumbling backwards.

“Don’t touch me again,” the boy snarled.

There stared back a desperate-looking boy, in shackles like he, and Darius realized he was shackled to a long line of boys, in both directions, long links of heavy iron connecting their wrists and ankles, all of them being herded down a dim stone tunnel. Empire taskmasters kicked and elbowed them along.

Darius scanned the faces as best he could, but recognized no one.

“Darius!” whispered an urgent voice. “Don’t collapse again! They’ll kill you!”

Darius’s heart leapt at the sound of a familiar voice, and he turned to see a few men behind him on the line, Desmond, Raj, Kaz, and Luzi, his old friends, the four of them all chained, all looking as badly beaten as he must have looked. They all looked at him with relief, clearly happy to see that he was alive.

“Talk again,” a taskmaster seethed to Raj, “and I’ll take your tongue.”

Darius, as relieved as he was to see his friends, wondered about the countless others who had fought and served with him, who had followed him into the streets of Volusia.

The taskmaster moved further down the line, and when he was out of sight, Darius turned and whispered back.

“What of the others? Did anyone else survive?”

He prayed secretly that hundreds of his men had made it, that they were somewhere waiting, prisoners maybe.

“No,” came the decisive answer from behind them. “We’re the only ones. All the others are dead.”

Darius felt as if he had been punched in the gut. He felt he had let everyone down, and despite himself, he felt a tear roll down his cheek.

He felt like sobbing. A part of him wanted to die. He could hardly conceive it: all those warriors from all those slave villages.... It had been the beginning of what was going to be the greatest revolution of all time, one that would change the face of the Empire forever.

And it had ended abruptly in a mass slaughter.

Now any chance of freedom they’d had was destroyed.

As Darius marched, in agony from the wounds and the bruises, from the iron shackles digging into his skin, he looked around and began to wonder where he was. He wondered who these other prisoners were, and where they were all being led. As he looked them over, he realized that they were all about his age, and they all seemed extraordinarily fit. As if they were all fighters.

They rounded a bend in the dark stone tunnel, and sunlight suddenly met them, streaming through iron cell bars up ahead, at the end of the tunnel. Darius was shoved roughly, jabbed in the ribs with a club, and he surged forward with the others until the bars were opened and he was given one final kick, out into daylight.

Darius stumbled with the others and they all fell down as a group onto the dirt. Darius spit dirt from his mouth and raised his hands to protect himself from the harsh sunlight. Others rolled on top of him, all of them tangled up in the shackles.

“On your feet!” shouted a taskmaster.

They walked from boy to boy, jabbing them with clubs, until finally Darius scrambled with the others to his feet. He stumbled as the other boys, chained to him, tried to gain their balance.

They stood and faced the center of a circular dirt courtyard, perhaps fifty feet in diameter, framed by high stone walls, cell bars around its openings. Facing them, standing in the center, scowling back, stood one Empire taskmaster, clearly their commander. He loomed large, taller than the others, with his yellow horns and skin, and his glistening red eyes, wearing no shirt, his muscles bulging. He wore black armor on his legs, boots, and studded leather on his wrists. He wore the rankings of an Empire officer, and he paced up and down, examining them all with disapproval.

“I am Morg,” he said, his voice dark, booming with authority. “You will address me as sir. I am your new warden. I am your whole life now.”

He breathed as he paced, sounding more like a snarl.

“Welcome to your new home,” he continued. “Your temporary home, that is. Because before the moon is up, you will all be dead. I will take great pleasure in watching you all die, in fact.”

He smiled.

“But for as long as you are here,” he added, “you will live. You will live to please me. You will live to please the others. You will live to please the Empire. You are our objects of entertainment now. Our show things. Our entertainment means your death. And you will execute it well.”

He smiled a cruel smile as he continued pacing, surveying them. There came a great shout somewhere off in the distance, and the entire ground trembled beneath Darius’s feet. It sounded like the shout of a hundred thousand citizens filled with bloodlust.

“Do you hear that cry?” he asked. “That is the cry of death. A thirst for death. Out there, behind those walls, lies the great arena. In that arena, you will fight others, you will fight yourselves, until none of you are left.”

He sighed.

“There will be three rounds of battle,” he added. “In the final round, if any of you survive, you will be granted your freedom, granted a chance to fight in the greatest arena of all. But don’t get your hopes up: no one has ever survived that long.

“You will not die quickly,” he added. “I am here to make sure of it. I want you dying slowly. I want you to be great objects of entertainment. You will learn to fight, and learn it well, to prolong our pleasure. Because you are not men anymore. You are not slaves. You are lower than slaves: you are gladiators now. Welcome to your new, and final, role. It won’t last long.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Volusia marched through the desert, her hundreds of thousands of men behind her, the sound of their marching boots filling the sky. It was a sweet sound to her ears, a sound of progress, of victory. She looked out as she went, and she was satisfied to see corpses lining the horizon, everywhere on the dried hard sands outlying the Empire capital. Thousands of them, sprawled out, all perfectly still, lying on their backs and looking up to the sky in agony, as if they had been flattened by a giant tidal wave.

Volusia knew it was no tidal wave. It was her sorcerers, the Voks. They had cast a very powerful spell, and had killed all those who thought they could ambush and kill her.

Volusia smirked as she marched, seeing her handiwork, relishing in this day of victory, in once again outsmarting those who meant to kill her. These were all Empire leaders, all great men, men who had never been defeated before, and the only thing standing between her and the capital. Now here they were, all these Empire leaders, all the men who had dared to defy Volusia, all the men who had thought they were smarter than her—all of them dead.

Volusia marched between them, sometimes avoiding the bodies, sometimes stepping over them, and sometimes, when she felt like it, stepping right on them. She took great satisfaction in feeling the enemy's flesh beneath her boots. It made her feel like a kid again.

Volusia looked up and saw the capital up ahead, its huge golden dome shining unmistakably in the distance, saw the massive walls surrounding it, a hundred feet high, noted its entrance, framed by soaring, arched golden doors, and felt the thrill of her destiny unfolding before her. Now, nothing lay between her and her final seat of power. No more politicians or leaders or commanders could stand in her way with any claim to rule the Empire but she. The long march, her taking one city after the next all these moons, her amassing her army one city at a time—finally, it all came to this. Just beyond those walls, just beyond those shining golden doors, stood her final conquest. Soon, she would be inside, she would assume the throne of power, and when she did, there would be no one and nothing left to stop her. She would take command of all the Empire's armies, of all its provinces and regions, the four horns and two spikes, and finally, every last creature of the Empire would have to declare her—a human—their supreme commander.

Even more so, they would have to call her *Goddess*.

The thought of it made her smile. She would erect statues of herself in every city, before every hall of power; she would name holidays after herself, make people salute each other by her name, and the Empire would soon know no name but hers.

Volusia marched before her army beneath the early morning suns, examining those golden doors and realizing this would be one of the greatest moments of her life. Leading the way before her men, she felt invincible—especially now that all the traitors within her ranks were dead. How foolish they had been, she thought, to assume she was naïve, to assume she would fall into their trap, just because she was young. So much for their old age—so far that had gotten them. It had gained them only an early death, an early death for underestimating her wisdom—a wisdom even greater than theirs.

And yet, as Volusia marched, as she studied the Empire bodies in the desert, she began to feel a growing sense of concern. There weren't as many bodies, she realized, as there should have been. There were perhaps a few thousand bodies, yet not the hundreds of thousands she had expected, not the main body of the Empire army. Had those leaders not brought all their men? And if not, where could they be?

She started to wonder: with its leaders dead, would the Empire capital still defend itself?

As Volusia neared the capital gates, she motioned for Vokin to step forward and for her army to stop.

As one, they all came to a stop behind her and finally there came a stillness in the morning desert nothing but the sound of the wind passing through, the dust rising in the air, a thorn bush tumbling. Volusia studied the massive sealed doors, the gold carved in ornate patterns and signs and symbols, telling stories of the ancient battles of the Empire lands. These doors were famous throughout the Empire, were said to have taken a hundred years to carve, and to be twelve feet thick. It was a sign of strength representing all the Empire lands.

Volusia, standing hardly fifty feet away, had never been so close to the capital entrance before, and was in awe of them—and of what they represented. Not only was it a symbol of strength and stability it was also a masterpiece, an ancient work of art. She ached to reach out and touch those golden doors, to run her hands along the carved images.

But she knew now was not the time. She studied them, and a sense of foreboding began to arise within her. Something was wrong. They were unguarded. And it was all too quiet.

Volusia looked straight up, and atop the walls, manning the parapets, she saw thousands of Empire soldiers slowly come into view, lined up, looking down, bows and spears at the ready.

An Empire general stood in their midst, looking down at them.

“You are foolish to come so close,” he boomed out, his voice echoing. “You stand in range of our bows and spears. With the twitch of my finger, I can have you all killed in an instant.

“But I will grant you mercy,” added. “Tell your armies to lay down their arms, and I will allow you to live.”

Volusia looked up at the general, his face obscured against the sun, this lone commander left behind to defend the capital, and she looked across the ramparts at his men, all their eyes trained on her, bows in their hands. She knew he meant what he’d said.

“I will give you one chance to lay down *your* arms,” she called back, “before I kill all of your men and burn this capital down to rubble.”

He snickered, and she watched as he and all his men lowered their face plates, preparing for battle.

As quick as lightning, Volusia suddenly heard the sound of a thousand arrows releasing, of a thousand spears being thrown, and as she looked up, she watched the sky blacken, thick with weaponry, all firing down right for her.

Volusia stood there, rooted to her spot, fearless, not even flinching. She knew that none of these weapons could harm her. After all, she was a goddess.

Beside her, the Vok raised a single long, green palm, and as he did, a green orb left his hand and floated up in the air before her, casting a shield of green light a few feet above Volusia’s head. A moment later, the arrows and spears bounced off it harmlessly and landed down on the ground beside her in a huge heap.

Volusia looked over in satisfaction at the growing pile of spears and arrows, and looked back up to see the stunned faces of all the empire soldiers.

“I will give you one more chance to lay down your arms!” she called back.

The empire commander stood there sternly, clearly frustrated and debating his options, but he did not budge. Instead he motioned to his men, and she could see them preparing another volley.

Volusia nodded to Vokin, and he gestured to his men. Dozens of Voks stepped forward and they all lined up and raised their hands high above their heads, aiming their palms. A moment later, dozens of green orbs filled the sky, heading for the capital walls.

Volusia watched in great expectation, expecting the walls to crumble, expecting to see all the men come crashing down at her feet, expecting the capital to be hers. She was anxious to sit on the throne already.

But Volusia watched in surprise and dismay as the green orbs of light bounced off the capital wall harmlessly, then disappeared in bright flashes of light. She could not understand: they were ineffectual.

Volusia looked over at Vokin, and he looked baffled, too.

The Empire commander, high above, snickered down.

“You are not the only one with sorcery,” he said. “These capital walls can be toppled by no magic—they have stood the test of time for thousands of years, have warded off barbarians, entire armies greater than yours. There is no magic that can topple them—only human hands.”

He grinned wide.

“So you see,” he added, “you’ve walked into the same mistake as so many other would-be conquerors before you. You’ve relied on sorcery in approaching this capital—and now you will pay the price.”

Up and down the parapets horns sounded, and Volusia looked over and was shocked to see an army of soldiers lining the horizon. They filled the skyline with black, hundreds of thousands of them, a vast army, greater even than the men she had behind her. They clearly had all been waiting beyond the wall, on the far side of the capital city, in the desert, for the command of the Empire commander. She had not just walked into another battle—this would be an outright war.

Another horn sounded, and suddenly, the massive golden doors before her began to open. They open wider and wider, and as they did there came a great battle cry, as thousands more Empire soldiers emerged, charging right for them.

At the same time, the hundreds of thousands of soldiers on the horizon charged, too, splitting their forces around the Empire city and charging them from both sides.

Volusia stood her ground, raised a single fist high, then brought it down.

Behind her, her army let out a great battle cry as they rushed forward to meet the Empire men.

Volusia knew this would be the battle that decided the fate of the capital—the very fate of the Empire. Her sorcerers had let her down—but her soldiers would not. After all, she could be more brutal than any other man, and she did not need sorcery for that.

She saw the men coming at her, and she stood her ground, relishing the chance to kill or be killed.

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