

RISE OF THE DRAGONS

KINGS AND SORCERERS (BOOK #1)



MORGAN RICE

RISE OF THE DRAGONS

(KINGS AND SORCERERS—BOOK 1)

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Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising eleven books (and counting); of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); and of the new epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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--*San Francisco Book Review*

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--*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*

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KINGS AND SORCERERS

THE SORCERER'S RING

THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY

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THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY

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“Men at some time are masters of their fates:
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.”

--William Shakespeare
Julius Caesar

CHAPTER ONE

Kyra stood atop the grassy knoll, the frozen ground hard beneath her boots, snow falling around her, and tried to ignore the biting cold as she raised her bow and focused on her target. She narrowed her eyes, shutting out the rest of the world—a gale of wind, the sound of a distant crow—and forced herself to see only the skinny birch tree, far-off, stark-white, standing out amidst the landscape of purple pine trees. At forty yards, this was just the sort of shot her brothers couldn't make, that even her father's men couldn't make—and that made her all the more determined—she being the youngest of the bunch, and the only girl amongst them.

Kyra had never fit in. A part of her wanted to, of course, wanted to do what was expected of her and spend time with the other girls, as was her place, attending to domestic affairs; but deep down, it was not who she was. She was her father's daughter, had a warrior's spirit, like he, and she would not be contained to the stone walls of their stronghold, would not succumb to a life beside a hearth. She was a better shot than these men—indeed, she could already outshoot her father's finest archers—and she would do whatever she had to to prove to them all—most of all, her father—that she deserved to be taken seriously. Her father loved her, she knew, but he refused to see her for who she was.

Kyra did her best training far from the fort, out here on the plains of Volis, alone—which suited her well, since she, the only girl in a fort of warriors, had learned to be alone. She had taken to retreating here every day, her favorite spot, high atop the plateau overlooking the fort's rambling stone walls, where she could find good trees, skinny trees

hard to hit. The thwack of her arrows had become an ever-present sound echoing over the village; not a tree up here had been spared from her arrows, their trunks scarred, some trees already leaning.

Most of her father's archers, Kyra knew, took aim at the mice that covered the plains; when she had first started, she had tried that herself, and had found she could kill them quite easily. But that had sickened her. She was fearless, but sensitive, too, and killing a living thing with no purpose displeased her. She had vowed then that she would never take aim at a living thing again—unless it were dangerous, or attacking her, like the Wolfbats that emerged at night and flew too close to her father's fort. She had no qualms about dropping them, especially after her younger brother, Aidan, suffered a Wolfbat bite that left him ill for half a moon. Besides, they were the fastest moving creatures out there, and she knew that if she could hit one, especially at night, then she could hit anything. She had once spent an entire night by a full moon firing away from her father's tower, and had run out eagerly at sunrise, thrilled to see scores of Wolfbats littering the ground, her arrows still in them, villagers crowding around and looking with amazed faces.

Kyra forced herself to focus. She played through the shot in her mind's eye, seeing herself raising her bow, pulling it back quickly to her chin and releasing without hesitation. The real shooting, she knew, happened before the shot. She had witnessed too many archers her age, on their fourteenth year, draw their strings and waver—and she knew then that their shots were lost. She took a deep breath, raised her bow, and in one decisive motion, pulled back and released. She did not even need to look to know she had hit the tree.

A moment later she heard its thwack—but she had already turned away, already looking for another target, one further off.

Kyra heard a whining at her feet and she looked down at Leo, her wolf, walking beside her as he always did, rubbing against her leg. A full-grown wolf, nearly up to her waist, Leo was as protective of Kyra as Kyra was of him, the two of them an inseparable sight in her father's fort. Kyra could not go anywhere without Leo hurrying to catch up. And all that time he clung to her side—unless a squirrel or rabbit crossed his path, in which case he could disappear for hours.

"I didn't forget you, boy," Kyra said, reaching into her pocket and handing Leo the leftover bone from the day's feast. Leo snatched it, trotting happily beside her.

As Kyra walked, her breath emerging in mist before her, she draped her bow over her shoulder and breathed into her hands, raw and cold. She crossed the wide, flat plateau and looked out. From this vantage point she could see the entire countryside, the rolling hills of Volis, usually green but now blanketed in snow, the province of her father's stronghold, nestled in the northeastern corner of the kingdom of Escalon. From up here Kyra had a bird's-eye view of all the goings-on in her father's fort, the comings and goings of the village folk and warriors, another reason she liked it up here. She liked to study the ancient, stone contours of her father's fort, the shapes of its battlements and towers stretching impressively through the hills, seeming to sprawl forever. Volis was the tallest structure in the countryside, some of its buildings rising four stories and framed by impressive layers of battlements. It was completed by a circular tower on its far side, a chapel for the folk, but for her, a place to climb and look out at the countryside and be alone. The stone complex was ringed by a moat, spanned by a wide main road and an arched stone bridge; this, in turn, was ringed by layers of impressive outer embankments, hills, ditches, walls—a place befitting one of the King's most important warriors—her father.

Though Volis, the final stronghold before The Flames, was several days' ride from Andros, Escalon's capital, it was still

home to many of the former King's famed warriors. It had also become a beacon, a place that had become home to the hundreds of villagers and farmers that lived in or near its walls, under its protection.

Kyra looked down at the dozens of small clay cottages nestled in the hills on the outskirts of the fort, smoke rising from chimneys, farmers hurrying to and fro as they prepared for winter, and for the night's festival. The fact that villagers felt safe enough to live outside the main walls, Kyra knew, was a sign of great respect for her father's might, and a sight unseen elsewhere in Escalon. After all, they were a mere horn sounding away from protection, from the instant rallying of all her father's men.

Kyra looked down at the drawbridge, always packed with throngs of people—farmers, cobblers, butchers, blacksmiths, along with, of course, warriors—all rushing from fort to countryside and back again. For within the fort's walls was not only a place to live and train, but also an endless array of cobblestone courtyards which had become a gathering place for merchants. Every day their stalls were lined up, people selling their wares, bartering, showing off the day's hunt or catch, or some exotic cloth or spice or candy traded from across the sea. The courtyards of the fort were always filled with some exotic smell, be it of a strange tea, or a cooking stew; she could get lost in them for hours. And just beyond the walls, in the distance, her heart quickened to see the circular training ground for her father's men, Fighter's Gate, and the low stone wall surrounding it, and she watched with excitement as his men charged in neat lines with their horses, trying to lance targets—shields hanging from trees. She ached to train with them.

Kyra suddenly heard a voice cry out, one as familiar to her as her own, coming from the direction of the gatehouse, and she turned, immediately on alert. There was a commotion in the crowd, and she watched as through the bustle, spilling out of the throng and out onto the main road,

there emerged her younger brother, Aidan, led by her two older brothers, Brandon and Braxton. Kyra tensed, on guard. She could tell from the sound of distress in her baby brother's voice that their older brothers were up to no good.

Kyra's eyes narrowed as she watched her older brothers, feeling a familiar anger rise up within her and unconsciously tightening her grip on her bow. There came Aidan, marched between them, each taller by a foot, each grabbing his arm and dragging him unwillingly away from the fort and into the countryside. Aidan, a small, thin, sensitive boy, barely ten, looked extra vulnerable sandwiched between his two brothers, overgrown brutes of seventeen and eighteen. They all had similar features and coloring, with their strong jaws, proud chins, dark brown eyes, and wavy brown hair—though Brandon and Braxton wore theirs cropped short, while Aidan's still fell, unruly, past his eyes. They all looked alike—and none like her, with her light blonde hair and light gray eyes. Dressed in her woven tights, woolen tunic, and cloak, Kyra was tall and thin, too pale, she was told, with a broad forehead and a small nose, blessed with striking features that had led more than one man to look twice. Especially now that she was turning fifteen, she noticed the looks increasing.

It made her uncomfortable. She did not like calling attention to herself, and she did not view herself as beautiful. She cared nothing for looks—only for training, for valor, for honor. She would rather have resembled her father, as her brothers did, the man she admired and loved more than anyone in the world, than have her dainty features. She always checked the mirror for something of himself in her eyes, yet no matter how hard she looked, she could not find it.

"I said, get *off* of me!" Aidan shouted, his voice carrying all the way up here.

At her baby brother's call of distress, a boy who Kyra loved more than anyone in the world, she stood ramrod

straight, like a lion watching its cub. Leo, too, stiffened, the hair rising on his back. With their mother long gone, Kyra felt obliged to watch over Aidan, to make up for the mother he never had.

Brandon and Braxton dragged him roughly down the road, away from the fort, on the lone country road toward the distant wood, and she saw them trying to get him to wield a spear, one too big for him. Aidan had become a too-easy target for them to pick on; Brandon and Braxton were bullies. They were strong and somewhat brave, but they had more bravado than real skills, and they always seemed to get into trouble they could not quite get out of themselves. It was maddening.

Kyra realized what was happening: Brandon and Braxton were dragging Aidan with them on one of their hunts. She spotted the sacks of wine in their hands and knew they'd been drinking, and she fumed. It was not enough that they were going to kill some senseless animal, but now they were dragging their younger brother along with them, despite his protests.

Kyra's instincts kicked in and she leapt into action, running downhill to confront them, Leo running by her side.

"You're old enough now," Brandon said to Aidan.

"It's past time you became a man," Braxton said.

Bounding down the grass hills she knew by heart, it did not take Kyra long to catch up to them. She ran out onto the road and stopped before them, blocking their path, breathing hard, Leo beside her, and her brothers all stopped short, looking back, stunned.

Aidan's face, she could see, fell in relief.

"Are you lost?" Braxton mocked.

"You're blocking our way," Brandon said. "Go back to your arrows and your sticks."

The two of them laughed derisively, but she frowned, undeterred, as Leo, beside her, snarled.

“Get that beast away from us,” Braxton said, trying to sound brave but fear apparent in his voice as he tightened his grip on his spear.

“And where do you think you’re taking Aidan?” she asked, dead serious, looking back at them without flinching.

They paused, their faces slowly hardening.

“We’re taking him wherever we please,” Brandon said.

“He’s going on a hunt to learn to become a *man*,” Braxton said, emphasizing that last word as a dig to her.

But she would not give in.

“He’s too young,” she replied firmly.

Brandon scowled.

“Says who?” he asked.

“Says me.”

“And are you his mother?” Braxton asked.

Kyra flushed, filled with anger, wishing their mother was here now more than ever.

“As much as you are his father,” she replied.

They all stood there in the tense silence, and Kyra looked to Aidan, who looked back with scared eyes.

“Aidan,” she asked him, “is this something you wish to do?”

Aidan looked down at the ground, ashamed. He stood there, silent, avoiding her glance, and Kyra knew he was afraid to speak out, to provoke the disapproval of his older brothers.

“Well, there you have it,” Brandon said. “He doesn’t object.”

Kyra stood there, burning with frustration, wanting Aidan to speak up but unable to force him.

“It is unwise for you to bring him on your hunt,” she said. “A storm brews. It will be dark soon. The wood is filled with danger. If you want to teach him to hunt, take him when he’s older, on another day.”

They scowled back, annoyed.

“And what do you know of hunting?” Braxton asked.
“What have you hunted beside those trees of yours?”

“Any of them bite you lately?” Brandon added.

They both laughed, and Kyra burned, debating what to do. Without Aidan speaking up, there wasn’t much she could do.

“You worry too much, sister,” Brandon finally said.

“Nothing will happen to Aidan on our watch. We want to toughen him up a bit—not kill him. Do you really imagine you’re the only one who cares for him?”

“Besides, Father is watching,” Braxton said. “Do you want to disappoint him?”

Kyra immediately looked up over their shoulders, and high up, in the tower, she spotted her father standing at the arched, open-aired window, watching. She felt supreme disappointment in him for not stopping this.

They tried to brush past, but Kyra stood there, doggedly blocking their way. They looked as if they might shove her, but Leo stepped between them, snarling, and they thought better of it.

“Aidan, it’s not too late,” she said to him. “You don’t have to do this. Do you wish to return to the fort with me?”

She examined him and could see his eyes tearing, but she could also see his torment. A long silence passed, with nothing to break it up but the howling wind and the quickening snow.

Finally, he squirmed.

“I want to hunt,” he muttered half-heartedly.

Her brothers suddenly brushed past her, bumping her shoulder, dragging Aidan, and as they hurried down the road, Kyra turned and watched, a sickening feeling in her stomach.

She turned back to the fort and looked up at the tower, but her father was already gone.

Kyra watched as her three brothers faded from view, into the brewing storm, toward the Wood of Thorns, and she felt

a pit in her stomach. She thought of snatching Aidan and bringing him back—but she did not want to shame him.

She knew she should let it go—but she could not. Something within her would not allow her to. She sensed danger, especially on the eve of the Winter Moon. She did not trust her elder brothers; they would not harm Aidan, she knew, but they were reckless, and too rough. Worst of all, they were overconfident in their skills. It was a bad combination.

Kyra could stand it no longer. If her father wouldn't act, then she would. She was old enough now—she did not need to answer to anyone but herself.

Kyra burst into a jog, running down the lone country path, Leo by her side, and heading right for the Wood of Thorns.

CHAPTER TWO

Kyra entered the gloomy Wood of Thorns, just west of the fort, a forest so thick one could barely see through it. As she walked through it slowly with Leo, snow and ice crunching beneath their feet, she looked up. She was dwarfed by the thorn trees that seemed to stretch forever. They were ancient black trees with gnarled branches resembling thorns, and thick, black leaves. This place, she felt, was cursed; nothing good ever came out of it. Her father's men returned from it injured from hunts, and more than once a troll, having broken through The Flames, had taken refuge here and used it as a staging ground to attack a villager.

As Kyra entered, immediately she felt a chill. It was darker in here, cooler, the air wetter, the smell of the thorn trees heavy in the air, smelling like decaying earth, and the massive trees blotting out what remained of daylight. Kyra, on guard, was furious at her older brothers. It was dangerous to venture here without the company of several warriors—especially at dusk. Every noise startled her. There came a distant cry of an animal, and she flinched, turning and looking for it. But the wood was dense, and she could not find it.

Leo, though, snarled beside her and suddenly bounded off after it.

"Leo!" she called out.

But he was already gone.

She sighed, annoyed; it was always his way when an animal crossed. He would return, though, she knew—eventually.

Kyra continued on, alone now, the wood growing darker, struggling to follow her brothers' trail—when she heard distant laughter. She snapped to attention, turning to the

noise and weaving past thick trees until she spotted her brothers up ahead.

Kyra lingered back, keeping a good distance, not wanting to be spotted. She knew that if Aidan saw her, he would be embarrassed and would send her away. She would watch from the shadows, she decided, just making sure they did not get into trouble. It was better for Aidan not to be shamed, to feel like he was a man.

A twig snapped beneath her feet and Kyra ducked, worried the sound would give her away—but her drunk older brothers were oblivious, already a good thirty yards ahead of her, walking quickly, the noise drowned out by their own laughter. She could see from Aidan's body language that he was tense, almost as if he were about to cry. He clutched his spear tightly, as if trying to prove himself a man, but it was an awkward grip on a spear too big, and he struggled under the weight of it.

"Get up here!" Braxton called out, turning to Aidan, who trailed a few feet behind.

"What are you so afraid of?" Brandon said to him.

"I'm not afraid—" Aidan insisted.

"Quiet!" Brandon suddenly said, stopping, holding out a palm against Aidan's chest, his expression serious for the first time. Braxton stopped, too, all of them tense.

Kyra took shelter behind a tree as she watched her brothers. They stood at the edge of a clearing, looking straight ahead as if they had spotted something.

She crept forward, on alert, trying to get a better look, and as she weaved between two large trees, she stopped, stunned, as she caught a glimpse of what they were seeing. There, standing alone in the clearing, rooting out acorns, was a boar. It was no ordinary boar; it was a monstrous, Black-Horned Boar, the largest boar she had ever seen, with long, curled white tusks and three long, sharpened, black horns, one protruding from its nose and two from its head. Nearly the size of a bear, it was a rare creature, famed for

its viciousness and its lightning-quick speed. It was an animal widely feared, and one that no hunter wanted to meet.

It was trouble.

Kyra, hair rising on her arms, wished Leo were here—yet was also grateful he was not, knowing he would bound off after it and unsure if he would win the confrontation. Kyra stepped forward, slowly removing her bow from her shoulder while instinctively reaching down to grab an arrow. She tried to calculate how far the boar was from the boys, and how far away she was—and she knew this was not good. There were too many trees in the way for her to get a clean shot—and with an animal this size, there was no room for error. She doubted one arrow could even fell it.

Kyra noticed the flash of fear on her brothers' faces, then saw Brandon and Braxton quickly cover up their fright with a look of bravado—one she felt sure was fueled by drink. They both raised their spears and took several steps forward. Braxton saw Aidan rooted in place, and he turned, grabbed the small boy's shoulder, and made him step forward, too.

"There's a chance to make a man of you," Braxton said. "Kill this boar and they'll sing of you for generations."

"Bring back its head and you'll be famed for life," Brandon said.

"I'm...scared," Aidan said.

Brandon and Braxton scoffed, then laughed derisively.

"Scared?" Brandon said. "And what would Father say if he heard you say that?"

The boar, alerted, lifted its head, revealing glowing yellow eyes, and stared at them, its face bunching up in an angry snarl. It opened its mouth, revealing fangs, and drooled, while at the same time emitting a vicious growl that erupted from somewhere deep in its belly. Kyra, even from her distance, felt a pang of fear—and she could only imagine the fear Aidan was feeling.

Kyra rushed forward, throwing caution to the wind, determined to catch up before it was too late. When she was just a few feet behind her brothers, she called out:

“Leave it alone!”

Her harsh voice cut through the silence, and her brothers all wheeled, clearly startled.

“You’ve had your fun,” she added. “Let it be.”

While Aidan looked relieved, Brandon and Braxton each scowled back at her.

“And what do you know?” Brandon shot back. “Stop interfering with real men.”

The boar’s snarl deepened as it crept toward them, and Kyra, both afraid and furious, stepped forward.

“If you are foolish enough to antagonize this beast, then go ahead,” she said. “But you will send Aidan back here to me.”

Brandon frowned.

“Aidan will do just fine here,” Brandon countered. “He’s about to learn how to fight. Aren’t you, Aidan?”

Aidan stood silent, stunned with fear.

Kyra was about to take another step forward and snatch Aidan’s arm when there came a rustling in the clearing. She saw the boar edge its way closer, one foot at a time, threateningly.

“It won’t attack if it’s not provoked,” Kyra urged her brothers. “Let it go.”

But her brothers ignored her, both turning and facing it and raising spears. They walked forward, into the clearing, as if to prove how brave they were.

“I’ll aim for its head,” Brandon said.

“And I, its throat,” Braxton agreed.

The boar snarled louder, opened its mouth wider, drooling, and took another threatening step.

“Get back here!” Kyra yelled out, desperate.

But Brandon and Braxton stepped forward, raised their spears, and suddenly threw them.

Kyra watched in suspense as the spears flew through the air, bracing herself for the worst. She saw, to her dismay, Brandon's spear graze its ear, enough to draw blood—and to provoke it—while Braxton's spear sailed past, missing its head by several feet.

For the first time, Brandon and Braxton looked afraid. They stood there, open-mouthed, a dumb look on their faces, the glow from their drink quickly replaced by fear.

The boar, infuriated, lowered its head, snarled a horrific sound, and suddenly charged.

Kyra watched in horror as it bore down on her brothers. It was the fastest thing she'd ever seen for its size, bounding through the grass as if it were a deer.

As it approached, Brandon and Braxton ran for their lives, darting away in opposite directions.

That left Aidan standing there, rooted in place, all alone, frozen in fear. His mouth agape, he loosened his grip and his spear fell from his hand, sideways to the ground. Kyra knew it wouldn't make much difference; Aidan could not have defended himself if he tried. A grown man could not have. And the boar, as if sensing it, set its sights on Aidan, aiming right for him.

Kyra, heart slamming, burst into action, knowing she would only have one chance at this. Without thinking, she bounded forward, dodging between the trees, already holding her bow before her, knowing she had one shot and that it had to be perfect. It would be a hard shot, even if the boar weren't moving, in her state of panic—yet it would have to be a perfect shot if they were to survive this.

"AIDAN, GET DOWN!" she shouted.

At first, he did not move. Aidan blocked her way, preventing a clean shot, and as Kyra raised her bow and ran forward, she realized that if Aidan did not move, her one shot would be lost. Stumbling through the wood, her feet slipping in the snow and damp earth, for a moment she felt all would be lost.

“AIDAN!” she shouted again, desperate.

By some miracle, he listened this time, diving down to the earth at the last second and leaving the shot open for Kyra.

As the boar charged for Aidan, time suddenly slowed for Kyra. She felt herself entering an altered zone, something rising up within her which she had never experienced and which she did not fully understand. The world narrowed and came into focus. She could hear the sound of her own heart beating, of her breathing, of the rustling of leaves, of a crow cawing high above. She felt more in tune with the universe than she ever had, as if she had entered some realm where she and the universe were one.

Kyra felt her palms begin to tingle with a warm, prickly energy she did not understand, as if something foreign were invading her body. It was as if, for a fleeting instant, she had become somebody bigger than herself, somebody much more powerful.

Kyra entered into a state of non-thinking, and she allowed herself to be driven by pure instinct, and by this new energy flowing through her. She planted her feet, raised the bow, placed an arrow, and let it fly.

She knew the second she released it that it was a special shot. She did not need to watch the arrow sail to know it was going exactly where she wanted it to: in the beast's right eye. She shot with such force that it lodged itself nearly a foot before stopping.

The beast suddenly grunted as its legs buckled out from under it, and it fell face-first in the snow. It slid across what remained of the clearing, writhing, still alive, until it reached Aidan. It finally came to a stop but a foot away from him, so close that, when it finally stopped, they were nearly touching.

It twitched on the ground, and Kyra, already with another arrow on her bow, stepped forward, stood over the boar,