

AN OATH OF BROTHERS

BOOK #14 IN THE SORCERER'S RING

MORGAN RICE

An o a t h o F b r o t h e r s

(Book #14 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 fourteen 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).

[TURNED](#) (Book #1 in the Vampire Journals) and [A QUEST OF HEROES](#) (Book #1 in the Sorcerer's Ring) are each available as a free download on Google Play!

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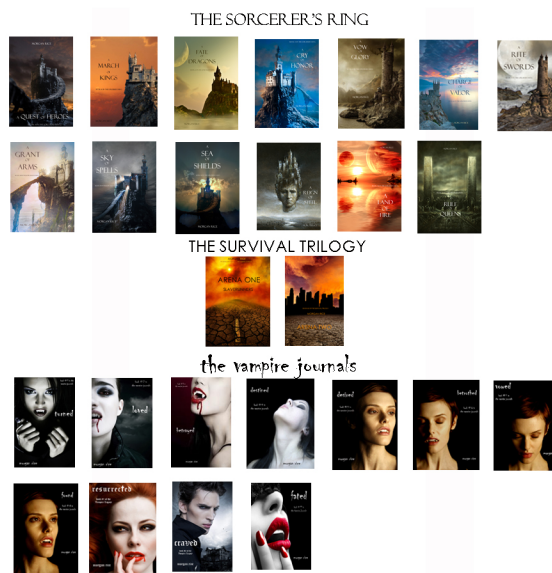
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CHAPTER ONE

Darius looked down at the bloody dagger in his hand, at the Empire commander dead at his feet, and he wondered what he had just done. His world slowed as he looked up and saw the shocked faces of the Empire army spread out before him, hundreds of men on the horizon, *real* men, warriors with *real* armor and *real* weaponry, scores of them mounted on zertas. Men who had never known defeat.

Behind Darius, he knew, were his few hundred paltry villagers, men and women without steel, without armor, left alone to face this professional army. They had implored him to surrender, to accept the maiming; they didn't want a war they could not win. They didn't want death. And Darius had wanted to oblige them.

But deep down in his soul he could not. His hands had acted on their own, his spirit had risen up on its own, and he could not have controlled it if he tried. It was the deepest part of himself, the part that had been oppressed his entire life, the part that thirsted for freedom as a dying man thirsts for water.

Darius looked out at the sea of faces, never feeling so alone, yet never feeling so free, and his world spun. He felt outside of himself, looking down on himself. It all felt surreal. He knew this was one of those pivotal moments of his life. He knew it was a moment that would change everything.

Yet Darius had no regrets. He looked at the dead Empire commander, this man who would have taken Loti's life, who would have taken all of their lives, who would have maimed them, and he felt a sense of justice. He also felt emboldened. After all, an Empire officer had fallen. And that meant that any Empire soldier could fall. They might be

bedecked in the greatest armor, the greatest weaponry, but they bled like any other man. They were not invincible.

Darius felt a rush of strength within him, and he burst into action before any of the others could react. A few feet away was the small entourage of Empire officers who had accompanied their commander, and they stood there in shock, clearly never expecting anything but surrender, never expecting their commander to be attacked.

Darius took advantage of their surprise. He lunged forward, drew a dagger from his waist, slashed one's throat, then spun around and in the same motion, slashed another.

The two of them stared back at him, eyes wide open, as if unbelieving this could happen to them, blood pouring from their throats, as they dropped to their knees, then collapsed, dead.

Darius braced himself; his bold move had left him vulnerable to attack, and one of the officers lunged forward and slashed his steel sword, aiming for his head. Darius wished at that moment that he had armor, a shield, a sword to block it—anything. But he did not. He'd left himself vulnerable to attack, and now, he knew he was going to pay the price. At least he would die a free man.

A sudden clang cut through the air, and Darius looked over to see Raj standing beside him, blocking the blow with a sword of his own. Darius glanced over and realized that Raj had taken the sword from the dead soldier and had rushed forward and blocked for him at the last moment.

Another clang tore through the air, and Darius looked to his other side to see Desmond blocking another blow meant for him. Raj and Desmond rushed forward, slashing back at their attackers, who had not expected the defense. They swung like men possessed, the clanging of their swords sparking as they met their attackers', driving them back, then each landing a deadly blow before the Empire soldiers could fully defend.

The two soldiers dropped down, dead.

Darius felt a rush of gratitude toward his brothers, elated to have them here, fighting at his side. He no longer faced the army alone.

Darius reached down, snatched the sword and the shield from the dead commander's body, then joined Desmond and Raj as they rushed forward and attacked the six remaining officers of his entourage. Darius swung the sword high, and relished the weight; it felt so good to wield a real sword, a real shield. He felt invincible.

Darius lunged forward and blocked a mighty sword slash with his shield and at the same time slipped a sword thrust between the links of an empire soldier's armor, stabbing him in the shoulder blade; the soldier grunted and dropped to his knees.

He turned and swung his shield, blocking a blow from the side, then spun around and used the shield as a weapon, smashing another attacker in the face and felling him. He then spun around with his sword and slashed his other attacker across the stomach, killing him just before the soldier, hands raised above his head, could land a blow on Darius's neck.

Raj and Desmond charged forward, too, at his side, going blow for blow with the other soldiers, the clanging sharp in his ears. Darius thought back to all their sparring with wooden swords, and he could see now, in battle, what great fighters they were. As he swung himself, he realized how much all of their sparring had sharpened him. He wondered if he could have won without it. And he was determined to win on his own, with his own two hands, and to never, ever, draw upon the magic power that lurked somewhere deep inside him and that he did not fully understand—or *want* to understand.

As Darius, Desmond, and Raj felled the remainder of the entourage, as they stood there alone in the midst of the battlefield, the hundreds of other Empire soldiers in the

distance finally rallied. Collecting themselves, they let out a great battle cry and charged down on them.

Darius looked out, standing there, breathing hard, the bloody sword in his hand, and he realized there was nowhere to run. As the perfect squadrons of soldiers burst into action, he realized that that was death coming his way. He stood his ground, as did Desmond and Raj, wiped the sweat off the back of his brow and faced them. He would not back down, not for anyone.

There came another great battle cry, this time from behind, and Darius glanced back and was happily surprised to see all of his villagers, charging, rallying. He spotted several of his brothers in arms rushing forward, scavenging swords and shields from the fallen Empire soldiers, racing to join their ranks. The villagers, Darius was proud to see, covered the battlefield like a wave, scavenging, arming themselves with steel and weaponry and soon, several dozen of them were armed with real weapons. Those that did not have steel wielded makeshift weapons carved of wood, dozens of the younger ones, Darius's friends, wielding short, wooden spears that they had sharpened to a point, and small wooden bows and arrows at their sides, clearly hoping for a fight such as this.

They all charged together, as one, each and every one fighting for their lives as they joined Darius to face the Empire army.

In the distance a huge banner waved, a trumpet sounded, and the Empire army mobilized. The clanging of armor filled the air as hundreds of the Empire soldiers marched forward as one, well-disciplined, a wall of men, shoulder to shoulder, holding ranks perfectly as they marched toward the crowd of villagers.

Darius led his men in the charge, all of them fearlessly beside him, and as they neared the empire ranks, Darius shouted:

“SPEARS!”

His people let their short spears fly, soaring over Darius's head, flying through the air and finding targets across the clearing. Many of the wooden spears, not sharp enough, hit armor and bounced off harmlessly. But more than a few found kinks in the armor and hit their mark, and a handful of Empire soldiers cried out, dropping in the distance.

"ARROWS!" Darius cried out, still charging, sword held high, closing the gap.

Several villagers stopped, took aim, and unleashed a volley of sharpened wooden arrows, dozens of them arcing high in the air, across the clearing, to the surprise of the Empire, who clearly had not expected a fight—much less for the villagers to have any weapons. Many bounced harmlessly off the armor, but enough found their marks, striking soldiers in the throats and in their joints, felling several more.

"STONES!" Darius yelled.

Several dozen villagers stepped forward and, using their slings, hurled stones.

A barrage of small stones hailed through the skies, and the sound of rocks hitting armor filled the air. A few soldiers, hit in the face by stones, dropped, while many others stopped and raised their shields or hands to stop the assault.

It slowed the Empire and added an element of uncertainty to their ranks—but it did not stop them. On and on they marched, never breaking ranks, even with arrows and spears and stones assailing them. They simply raised their shields, too arrogant to duck, marching with their shining steel halberds straight up in the air, their long, steel swords swinging at their belts, clanging in the morning light. Darius watched them advance, and he knew that was a professional army coming toward him. He knew it was a wave of death.

There came a sudden rumbling, and Darius looked up and saw three huge zertas break from the front lines and

come charging toward them, one officer riding each, wielding long halberds. The zertas charged, fury on their faces, kicking up waves of dust.

Darius braced himself as one bore down on him, the soldier sneering as he raised his halberd and suddenly hurled it right for him. Darius was caught off guard by the speed, and at the last moment he dodged it, barely getting out of the way.

But the villager behind them, a boy he knew from growing up, was not so lucky. He cried out in pain as the halberd pierced his chest, blood gushing from his mouth as he dropped to his back, staring up at the sky.

Darius, in a rage, turned and faced the zerta. He waited and waited, knowing that if he did not time it perfectly, he would be trampled to death.

At the last second Darius rolled out of the way and swung his sword, chopping the zerta's legs out from under him.

The zerta shrieked and dropped face-first to the ground, its rider flying off it, landing in the group of villagers.

A villager broke from the crowd and rushed forward, hoisting a large rock high overhead. Darius turned and was surprised to see it was Loti—she held it high, then smashed it down on the soldier's helmet, killing him.

Darius heard galloping and turned to find, bearing down on him, another zerta, the soldier astride it raising his spear and aiming it down at him. There was no time to react.

A snarl ripped through the air, and Darius was surprised to see Dray suddenly appear, leaping forward, high into the air, and biting the soldier's foot just as he hurled the spear. The soldier lurched forward and his spear throw went straight down, into the dirt. He wobbled and fell sideways off the zerta, and as he hit the ground he was pounced on by several villagers.

Darius looked to Dray, who came running to his side, forever grateful to him.

Darius heard another battle cry and turned to find yet another Empire officer charging him, raising his sword and bringing it down on him. Darius turned and parried, knocking the other sword away with a clang before it could reach his chest. Darius then spun around and kicked the soldier's feet out from under him. He fell to the ground, and Darius kicked him across the jaw before he could rise, knocking him out for good.

Darius watched Loti race past him, throwing herself headlong right into the thick of the fight as she reached down and snatched a sword from a dead soldier's waist. Dray lunged forward before her to protect her, and it concerned Darius to see her in the thick of the fight, and he wanted to get her to safety.

Loc, her brother, beat him to it. He rushed forward and grabbed Loti from behind, making her drop the spear.

"We must go from here!" he said. "This is no place for you!"

"This is the *only* place for me!" she insisted.

Loc, though, even with his one good hand, was surprisingly strong, and he managed to drag her, protesting and kicking, away from the thick of battle. Darius was more grateful to him than he could say.

Darius heard a clang of steel beside him and he turned to see one of his brothers in arms, Kaz, struggling with an Empire soldier. While Kaz had once been a bully and a thorn in Darius' side, now, Darius had to admit, he was happy to have Kaz by his side. He saw Kaz go back and forth with the soldier, a formidable warrior, clang for clang, until finally the soldier, in a surprise move, bested Kaz and knocked the sword from his hand.

Kaz stood there, defenseless, fear in his face for the first time Darius could remember. The Empire soldier, blood in his eyes, stepped forward to finish him off.

Suddenly, there came a clang, and the soldier suddenly froze and fell, face-first, down to the ground. Dead.

They both looked over, and Darius was shocked to see Luzi standing there, half Kaz's size, holding a sling in his hand, empty from having just fired. Luzi smirked at Kaz.

"Regret bullying me now?" he said to Kaz.

Kaz stared back, speechless.

Darius was impressed that Luzi, after the way he'd been tormented by Kaz in all their days of training, had stepped up and saved his life. It inspired Darius to fight even harder.

Darius, seeing the abandoned zerta stomping wildly through his ranks, rushed forward, ran up alongside it, and mounted it.

The zerta jerked wildly, but Darius held on, clutching it tight, determined. Finally, he got control of it, and he managed to turn it and direct it toward the Empire ranks.

His zerta galloped so fast he could barely control it, taking him out beyond all his men, leading the charge single-handedly into the thick of the Empire ranks. Darius's heart slammed in his chest as he neared the wall of soldiers. It seemed impenetrable from here. And yet, there was no turning back.

Darius forced his courage to carry him through. He charged right into them and as he did, he slashed down wildly with his sword.

From his higher vantage point, Darius slashed side to side, taking out scores of surprised Empire soldiers, who had not expected to be charged by a zerta. He cut through the ranks with blinding speed, parting the sea of soldiers, carried by his momentum—when suddenly, he felt a horrific pain on his side. It felt as if his ribs were being torn in two.

Darius, losing his balance, went flying through the air. He hit the ground hard, feeling a searing pain in his side, and realized he'd been smashed with the metal ball of a flail. He lay there on the ground, in the sea of Empire soldiers, far from his people.

As he lay there, his head ringing, his world blurry, he looked out in the distance and noticed his people getting

surrounded. They fought valiantly, but they were just too outnumbered, too outmatched. His men were getting slaughtered, their screams filling the air.

Darius's head, too heavy, dropped back down to the ground and as he lay there, he looked up and saw all the Empire men closing in on him. He lay there, spent, and knew his life would soon be over.

At least, he thought, he would die with honor.

At least, finally, he was free.

CHAPTER TWO

Gwendolyn stood on the crest of the hill, looking out at the breaking dawn over the desert sky, and her heart pounded in anticipation as she prepared to strike. Watching the Empire confrontation with the villagers from afar, she had marched her men here, skirting the battlefield the long way, and positioned them behind Empire lines. The Empire, so focused on the villagers, on the battle below, had never seen them coming. And now, as villagers began to die below, it was time to make them pay.

Ever since Gwen had decided to turn her men around, to help the villagers, she had felt an overwhelming sense of destiny. Win or lose, she knew it was the right thing to do. She had watched the confrontation unfolding from high in the mountain ranges, had seen the Empire armies approaching with their zertas and professional soldiers, and it brought back fresh feelings, reminding her of the Ring's invasion by Andronicus, and then, Romulus. She had watched Darius step forward by himself, to face them, and her heart had soared as she had witnessed him kill that commander. It was something that Thor would have done. That she herself would have done.

Gwen stood there now, Krohn snarling quietly beside her, Kendrick, Steffen, Brandt, Atme, dozens of Silver and hundreds of her men all behind her, all wearing the steel armor they'd had since they'd left the Ring, all bearing their steel weaponry, all patiently awaiting her command. Hers was a professional army, and they had not had a fight since they'd been exiled from their homeland.

The time had come.

"NOW!" Gwen cried.

There arose a great battle cry as all of her men, led by Kendrick, raced down the hill, their voices carrying like a thousand lions in the early morning light.

Gwen watched as her men reached the Empire lines and as the Empire soldiers, preoccupied with fighting the villagers, slowly turned, baffled, clearly not understanding who could be attacking them or why. Clearly, these Empire soldiers had never been caught off guard before, and certainly not by a professional army.

Kendrick gave them no time to collect themselves, to process what was happening. He lunged forward, stabbing the first man he encountered, and Brandt and Atme and Steffen and the dozens of Silver at their side all joined in, shouting as they plunged their weapons into the soldiers. All of her men carried a great grudge, all had been itching for a fight, craving vengeance against the empire and cooped up from sitting idle too many days in that cave. They had been craving, Gwen knew, to let their wrath out on the Empire ever since they'd abandoned the Ring—and in this battle, they'd found the perfect outlet. In each of her people's eyes there burned a fire, a fire that held the souls of all the loved ones they'd lost in the Ring and the Upper Isles. It was a need for vengeance that they had carried across the sea. In many ways, Gwen realized, the villagers' cause, even halfway around the world, was their cause, too.

Men cried out as they fought hand-to-hand, Kendrick and the others using their momentum to slash their way thick into the fray, taking out rows of Empire soldiers before they could even rally. Gwen was so proud as she watched Kendrick block two blows with his shield, spin around and smash one soldier in the face with it, then slash another across the chest. She watched as Brandt kicked a soldier's legs out from under him, then stabbed him, on his back, through the heart, driving his sword down with both hands. She saw Steffen wield his short sword and chop off a soldier's leg, then step forward and kick another soldier in

the groin and head-butt him, knocking him out. Atme swung his flail and took out two soldiers in one blow.

“Darius!” cried the voice.

Gwen looked over to see Sandara standing beside her, pointing to the battlefield.

“My brother!” she cried.

Gwen spotted Darius on the ground, on his back, and surrounded by Empire, closing in. Her heart leapt with concern, but she watched with great satisfaction as Kendrick rushed forward and held out his shield, saving Darius from an axe blow right before it hit his face.

Sandara cried out, and Gwen could see her relief, could see how much she loved her brother.

Gwendolyn reached over and took a bow from one of the soldiers standing guard beside her. She placed an arrow, pulling it back and taking aim.

“ARCHERS!” she yelled.

All around her a dozen of her archers took aim, pulling back their bows, awaiting her command.

“FIRE!”

Gwen shot her arrow high into the sky, over her men, and as she did, her dozen archers fired, too.

The volley landed on the thicket of remaining Empire soldiers, and cries rang out as a dozen soldiers dropped to their knees.

“FIRE!” she yelled again.

There came yet another volley; then another.

Kendrick and his men rushed in, killing all those men who had dropped to their knees from the arrows.

The Empire soldiers were forced to abandon attacking the villagers and instead turn their army around and confront Kendrick’s men.

This gave the villagers an opportunity. They let out a loud cry as they charged forward, stabbing in the back the Empire soldiers, who were now getting slaughtered from both sides.

The Empire soldiers, squeezed between two hostile forces, their numbers dwindling quickly, finally began to realize they were outmaneuvered. Their ranks of hundreds soon dwindled to dozens, and those who remained turned and tried to flee on foot, their zertas either killed or taken hostage.

They did not make it very far before they were hunted down and killed.

There arose a great shout of triumph from both the villagers and Gwendolyn's men. They all gathered together, cheering, embracing each other as brothers, and Gwendolyn hurried down the slope and joined them, Krohn at her heels, bursting into the thick of it, men all around her, the smell of sweat and fear strong in the air, blood running fresh on the desert floor. Here, on this day, despite everything that had happened back in the Ring, Gwen felt a moment of triumph. It was a glorious victory here in the desert, the villagers and the exiles of the Ring joined together, united in defiance of the enemy.

The villagers had lost many good men, and Gwen had lost some of hers. But Darius, at least, Gwen was relieved to see, was alive, helped unsteadily to his feet.

Gwen knew the Empire had millions more men. She knew a day of reckoning would come.

But that day was not today. Today she had not made the wisest decision—but she had made the bravest one. The right one. She felt it was a decision her father would have made. She had chosen the hardest path. The path of what was right. The path of justice. The path of valor. And regardless of what might come, on this day she had lived.

She had really lived.

CHAPTER THREE

Volusia stood on the stone balcony looking down, the cobblestone courtyard of Maltolis spread out below her, and far below she saw the sprawled out body of the Prince, lying there, unmoving, his limbs spread out in grotesque position. He seemed so far away from up here, so minuscule, so powerless, and Volusia marveled how, just moments before, he had been one of the most powerful rulers in the Empire. It struck home how frail life was, what an illusion power was—and most of all, how she, of infinite power, a true goddess now, wielded the power of life and death over anyone. Now, no one, not even a great prince, could stop her.

As she stood there, looking out, there arose all throughout the city the cries of his thousands of people, the touched citizens of Maltolis, moaning, their sound filling the courtyard and rising up like a plague of locusts. They wailed and screamed and slammed their heads against the stone walls; they leapt to the floor, like irate children, and tore the hair from their scalps. From the sight of them, Volusia mused, one would think that Maltolis had been a benevolent leader.

“OUR PRINCE!” one of them screamed, a scream echoed by many others as they all rushed forward, leaping onto the mad Prince’s body, sobbing and convulsing as they clutched it.

“OUR DEAR FATHER!”

Bells suddenly tolled all throughout the city, a long succession of ringing, echoing each other. Volusia heard a commotion and she raised her eyes and watched as hundreds of Maltolis’s troops marched hurriedly through the city gates, into the city courtyard, in rows of two, the

portcullis rising to let them all in. They all aimed for Maltolis's castle.

Volusia knew she had set in motion an event that would forever alter this city.

There came a sudden, insistent booming at the thick oak door to her chamber, making her jump. It was an incessant slamming, the sound of dozens of soldiers, armor clanging, slamming a battering ram into the thick oak door of the Prince's chamber. Volusia, of course, had barred it, and the door, a foot thick, meant to withstand a siege, nonetheless buckled on its hinges, as the shouts of men came from the other side. With each slam it bent more.

Slam slam slam.

The stone chamber shook, and the ancient metal chandelier, hanging high above from a wooden beam, swayed wildly before it came crashing down to the floor.

Volusia stood there and watched it all calmly, expecting it all. She knew, of course, that they would come for her. They wanted vengeance—and they would never let her escape.

"Open the door!" shouted one of his generals.

She recognized his voice—the leader of Maltolis's forces, a humorless man she had met briefly, with a low, raspy voice—an inept man but a professional soldier, and with two hundred thousand men at his disposal.

And yet Volusia stood there and faced the door calmly, unfazed, watching it patiently, waiting for them to crash it down. She could of course have opened it for them, but she would not give them the satisfaction.

Finally there came a tremendous crash, and the wooden door gave way, bursting off its hinges, and dozens of soldiers, armor clanging, rushed the room. Maltolis' commander, donning his ornamental armor, and carrying the golden scepter that entitled him to command Maltolis' army, led the way.

They slowed to a quick walk as they saw her standing there, alone, not trying to run. The commander, a deep

scowl set on his face, marched right up to her and stopped abruptly a few feet away.

He glared down at her with hatred, and behind him, all his men stopped, well-disciplined, and awaited his command.

Volusia stood there calmly, staring back with a slight smile, and she realized her poise must have thrown them off, as he seemed flustered.

“What have you done, woman?” he demanded, clutching his sword. “You have come into our city as a guest and you have killed our ruler. The chosen one. The one who could not be killed.”

Volusia smiled back, and replied calmly:

“You are quite wrong, General,” she said. “I am the one who cannot be killed. As I have just proved here today.”

He shook his head in fury.

“How could you be so stupid?” he said. “Surely you must have known we would kill you and your men, that there is nowhere to run, no way to escape this place. Here, your few are surrounded by hundreds of thousands of ours. Surely you must have known that your act here today would amount to your death sentence—worse, your imprisonment and torture. We do not treat our enemies kindly, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“I have noticed indeed, General, and I admire it,” she replied. “And yet you will not lay a hand on me. None of your men will.”

He shook his head, annoyed.

“You are more foolish than I thought,” he said. “I bear the golden scepter. All of our armies will do as I say. *Exactly* as I say.”

“Will they?” she asked slowly, a smile on her face.

Slowly, Volusia turned and looked through the open-air window, down at the Prince’s body, now being hoisted upon the shoulders of lunatics and bore throughout the city like a martyr.

Her back to him, she cleared her throat and continued.

"I do not doubt, General," she said, "that your forces are well-trained. Or that they will follow he who wields the scepter. Their fame precedes them. I know, too, that they are vastly greater than mine. And that there is no way to escape from here. But you see, I do not wish to escape. I do not need to."

He looked back at her, baffled, and Volusia turned and looked out the window, combing the courtyard. In the distance she spotted Koolian, her sorcerer, standing there in the crowd, ignoring all the others and staring only up at her with his glowing green eyes and wart-lined face. He wore his black cloak, unmistakable in the crowd, his arms folded calmly, his pale face looking up at her, partially hidden behind the hood, awaiting her command. He stood there, the only one still and patient and disciplined in this chaotic city.

Volusia gave him a barely discernible nod, and she saw him immediately nod back.

Slowly, Volusia turned, a smile on her face, and faced the general.

"You can hand me the scepter now," she said, "or I can kill you all and take it for myself."

He looked back at her, astounded, then shook his head and, for the first time, smiled.

"I know delusional people," he said. "I served one for years. But you...you are in a class of your own. Very well. If you wish to die that way, then so be it."

He stepped up and drew his sword.

"I am going to enjoy killing you," he added. "I wanted to from the moment I saw your face. All that arrogance—it is enough to make a man sick."

He approached her, and as he did, Volusia turned and suddenly saw Koolian standing in the room beside her.

Koolian turned and stared at him, startled at his sudden appearance out of thin air. He stood there, stumped, clearly

not expecting this, and clearly not knowing what to make of him.

Koolian pulled back his black hood and sneered back at him with his grotesque face, too pale, his white eyes, rolling back in his head, and he slowly raised his palms.

As he did, suddenly, the commander and all his men dropped to their knees. They shrieked and raised their hands to their ears.

“Make it stop!” he yelled.

Slowly, blood poured from their ears, and one by one, they dropped to the stone floor, unmoving.

Dead.

Volusia stepped up slowly, calmly, reached down, and grabbed the golden scepter from the commander’s dead hand.

She lifted it high and examined it in the light, admiring the weight of it, the way it glistened. It was a sinister thing.

She smiled wide.

It was even heavier than she had imagined.

*

Volusia stood just beyond the moat, outside the city walls of Maltolis, her sorcerer, Koolian, her assassin, Aksan, and the commander of her Volusian forces, Soku, behind her, and she looked out at the vast Maltolisian army assembled before her. As far as she could see, the desert plains were filled with Maltolis’s men, two hundred thousand of them, a greater army than she’d ever laid eyes upon. Even for her, it was awe-inspiring.

They stood there patiently, leader-less, all looking to her, Volusia, who stood on a raised dais, facing them. The tension was thick in the air, and Volusia could sense that they were all waiting, pondering, deciding whether to kill her or to serve her.

Volusia looked out at them proudly, feeling her destiny before her, and slowly raised the golden scepter up

overhead. She turned slowly, in every direction, so they could all see her, all see the scepter, glistening in the sun.

“MY PEOPLE!” she boomed out. “I am the Goddess Volusia. Your prince is dead. I am the one who bears the scepter now; I am the one you shall follow. Follow me, and you shall gain glory and riches and all your hearts’ desires. Stay here, and you will waste away and die in this place, under the shadow of these walls, under the shadow of a corpse of a leader who never loved you. You served him in madness; you shall serve me in glory, in conquest, and finally have the leader you deserve.”

Volusia raised the scepter higher, looking out at them, meeting their disciplined glances, feeling her destiny. She felt that she was invincible, that nothing could lie in her way, not even these hundreds of thousands of men. She knew that they, like all the world, would bow down to her. She saw it happening in her mind’s eye; after all, she was a goddess. She lived in a realm above men. What choice could they have?

As sure as she envisioned it, there came a slow clanking of armor, and one by one, all of the men before her took a knee, one after the other, a great clang of armor spreading across the desert, as they all knelt down to her.

“VOLUSIA!” they chanted softly, again and again.

“VOLUSIA!”

“VOLUSIA!”

CHAPTER FOUR

Godfrey felt the sweat pouring down the back of his neck as he huddled inside the group of slaves, trying not to stick to the middle and not be seen as they wound their way through the streets of Volusia. Another crack cut through the air, and Godfrey screamed out in pain as the tip of a whip lashed his behind. The slave beside him screamed much louder, as the whip was mostly meant for her. It lashed her solidly across the back, and she cried and stumbled forward.

Godfrey reached out and caught her before she collapsed, acting on impulse, knowing he was risking his life in doing so. She steadied herself and turned to him, panic and fear across her face, and as she saw him, her eyes opened wide in surprise. Clearly, she had not expected to see him, a human, light of skin, walking freely beside her, unshackled. Godfrey shook his head quickly and raised a finger to his mouth, praying she'd remain silent. Luckily, she did.

There came another crack of a whip and Godfrey looked over and saw taskmasters working their way up the convoy, mindlessly lashing slaves, clearly just wanting to keep their presence known. As he glanced back, he noticed, right behind him, the panicked faces of Akorth and Fulton, eyes darting about, and beside them, the calm, determined faces of Merek and Ario. Godfrey marveled that these two boys showed more composure and bravery than Akorth and Fulton, two grown, albeit drunk, men.

They marched and marched, and Godfrey sensed they were nearing their destination, wherever that might be. Of course, he could not let them arrive there: he had to make a move soon. He had accomplished his goal, had managed to