

A knight in full plate armor, including a helmet with a visor, is riding a dark horse. The horse is also equipped with armor on its head and neck. The knight is holding a sword. The background is a dramatic sky with clouds, illuminated by a low sun, creating a silhouette effect on the knight and horse.

MORGAN RICE

RISE  
OF THE  
VALIANT

KINGS AND SORCERERS (BOOK #2)

# RISE OF THE VALIANT

(KINGS AND SORCERERS—BOOK 2)

MORGAN RICE

## **Morgan Rice**

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, comprising two books (and counting). Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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

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--*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."

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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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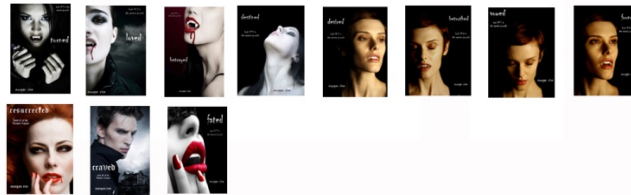
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“Cowards die many times before their deaths;  
The valiant never taste of death but once.”

--William Shakespeare  
*Julius Caesar*



## CHAPTER ONE

Kyra walked slowly through the carnage, snow crunching beneath her boots, taking in the devastation the dragon had left behind. She was speechless. Thousands of the Lord's Men, the most feared men in Escalon, lay dead before her, wiped out in an instant. Charred bodies lay smoking all around her, the snow melted beneath them, their faces contorted in agony. Skeletons, twisted in unnatural positions, still clutched their weapons in bony fingers. A few corpses stood in place, their frames somehow staying vertical, still looking up at the sky as if wondering what had killed them.

Kyra stopped beside one, examining it with wonder. She reached out and touched it, her finger grazing its rib cage, and she watched in amazement as it crumbled and fell, clattering to the ground in a heap of bones, its sword falling harmlessly by its side.

Kyra heard a screech high overhead and she craned her neck to see Theos, circling high above, breathing flame as if still unsatisfied. She could feel what he was feeling, feel the rage burning in his veins, his desire to destroy all of Pandesia—indeed, the entire world—if he could. It was a primal rage, a rage which knew no bounds.

The sound of boots in the snow snapped her out of it, and Kyra looked back to see her father's men, dozens of them, walking through, taking in the destruction, eyes wide in shock. These battle-hardened men had clearly never seen a sight like this; even her father, standing nearby, joined by Anvin, Arthfael and Vidar, seemed frazzled. It was like walking through a dream.

Kyra noticed these brave warriors turn from searching the skies to looking at her, a sense of wonder in their eyes. It was as if *she* were the one who had done all of this, as if she

were the dragon herself. After all, only she had been able to summon it. She looked away, feeling uncomfortable; she could not tell if they looked at her as if a warrior or a freak. Perhaps they did not know themselves.

Kyra thought back to her prayer on the Winter Moon, her wish to know if she were special, if her powers were real. After today, after this battle, she could have no doubts. She had *willed* that dragon to come. She had felt it herself. How, she did not know. But she knew now, definitively, that she was different. And she could not help but wonder if that also meant the other prophecies about her were true. Was she then truly destined to become a great warrior? A great ruler? Greater even than her father? Would she truly lead nations into battle? Would the fate of Escalon truly hang upon her shoulders?

Kyra did not see how it could be possible. Maybe Theos had come for his own reasons; maybe his damage here had nothing to do with her. After all, the Pandesians had injured him—hadn't they?

Kyra no longer felt sure of anything. All she knew was that, in this moment, feeling the strength of the dragon burning in her veins, walking this battlefield, seeing their greatest foe dead, she felt that all things were possible. She knew she was no longer a fifteen-year-old girl hoping for approval in other men's eyes; she was no longer a plaything for the Lord Governor—for any man—to do with as he wished; she was no longer the property of other men, to be married off, abused, tortured. She was her own person now. A warrior among men—and one to be feared.

Kyra walked through the sea of bodies until finally the corpses stopped and the landscape morphed to ice and snow again. She paused beside her father, taking in the vista as down below the valley spread out beneath them. There lay the wide open gates of Argos, a city emptied, all its men dead in these hills. It was eerie to see such a great fort sitting vacant, unguarded. Pandesia's most important

stronghold was now wide open for anyone to enter. Its daunting high walls, carved of thick stone and spikes, its thousands of men and layers of defenses, had precluded any idea of revolt; its presence here had allowed Pandesia an iron grip on the whole of northeastern Escalon.

They all set off down the slope and onto the winding road that led to the city gates. It was a victorious but solemn walk, the road littered with more dead bodies, stragglers whom the dragon had sought out, markers on the trail to destruction. It was like walking through a graveyard.

As they passed through the awesome gates, Kyra paused at the threshold, her breath taken away: inside, she could see, lay thousands more corpses, charred, smoking. It was what had remained of the Lord's Men, those late to mobilize. Theos had forgotten no one; his fury was visible even on the fort's walls, large swaths of stone stained black with flame.

As they entered, Argos was notable for its silence. Its courtyard empty, it was uncanny for such a city to be so devoid of life. It was as if God had sucked it all up in a single breath.

As her father's men rushed forward, sounds of excitement began to fill the air, and Kyra soon understood why. The ground, she could see, was littered with a treasure trove of weapons unlike any she had ever seen. There, spread out on the courtyard ground, lay the spoils of war: the finest weaponry, the finest steel, the finest armor she had ever seen, all gleaming with Pandesian markings. There were even, scattered amongst them, sacks of gold.

Even better, at the far end of the courtyard there sat a vast stone armory, its doors wide open as the men had left in haste, revealing inside a bounty of treasures. Walls were lined with swords, halberds, pikes, hatchets, spears, bows—all made of the finest steel the world had to offer. There were enough weapons here to arm half of Escalon.

There came the sound of neighing, and Kyra looked to the other side of the courtyard to see a row of stone stables,

and inside there stomped an army of the finest horses, all spared the dragon's breath. Enough horses to carry an army.

Kyra saw the look of hope rising in her father's eyes, a look she had not seen in years, and she knew what he was thinking: Escalon could rise again.

There came a screech, and Kyra looked up to see Theos circling lower, talons extended, flapping his great wings as he flew over the city, a victory lap. His glowing yellow eyes locked on hers, even from that great distance. She could not look anywhere else.

Theos dove down and landed outside the city gates. He sat there proudly, facing her, as if summoning her. She felt him calling her.

Kyra felt her skin prickling, the heat rising within her, as she felt an intense connection with this creature. She had no choice but to approach him.

As Kyra turned and crossed the courtyard, heading back toward the city gates, she could feel the eyes of all the men on her, looking from the dragon to her as they stopped to watch. She walked alone toward the gate, her boots crunching in the snow, her heart pounding as she went.

As she went, Kyra suddenly felt a gentle hand on her arm, stopping her. She turned to see her father's concerned face looking back.

"Be careful," he warned.

Kyra continued walking, feeling no fear, despite the fierce look in the dragon's eyes. She felt only an intense bond with him, as if a part of her had reappeared, a part she could not live without. Her mind spun with curiosity. Where had Theos come from? Why had he come to Escalon? Why had he not come back sooner?

As Kyra passed through Argo's gates and neared the dragon, his noises grew louder, somewhere between a purr and a snarl, as he waited for her, his huge wings flapping gently. He opened his mouth as if to release fire, baring his huge teeth, each one as long as she, and sharp as a sword.

For a moment she was frightened, his eyes fixed on her with an intensity that made it hard to think.

Kyra finally came to a stop a few feet before him. She studied him in awe. Theos was magnificent. He rose thirty feet high, his scales thick, hard, primordial. The ground trembled as he breathed, his chest rattling, and she felt entirely at his mercy.

They stood there in the silence, the two of them facing off, examining each other, and Kyra's heart slammed in her chest, the tension in the air so thick she could hardly breathe.

Her throat dry, she finally summoned the courage to speak.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "Why have you come to me? What do you want from me?"

Theos lowered his head, snarling, and leaned forward, so close that his huge snout nearly touched her chest. His eyes, so huge, glowing yellow, seemed to look right through her. She stared into them, each nearly as big as her, and felt lost in another world, another time.

Kyra waited for the answer. She waited for her mind to be filled with his thoughts, as it once was.

But she waited and waited, and was shocked to find her mind was blank. Nothing was coming to her. Had Theos gone silent? Had she lost her connection to him?

Kyra stared back, wondering, this dragon more of a mystery than ever. Suddenly, he lowered his back, as if beckoning her to ride. Her heart quickened as she imagined herself flying through the skies on his back.

Kyra slowly walked to his side, reached up, and grabbed his scales, hard and rough, preparing to grab his neck and climb up.

But no sooner had she touched him when he suddenly writhed away, making her lose her grip. She stumbled and he flapped his wings and in one quick motion, lifted off, so

abrupt that her palms scraped against his scales, like sandpaper.

Kyra stood there, stung, baffled—but most of all, heartbroken. She watched helplessly as this tremendous creature lifted into the air, screeching, and flew higher and higher. As quickly as he had arrived, Theos suddenly disappeared into the clouds, nothing but silence following in his wake.

Kyra stood there, hollowed out, more alone than ever. And as the last of his cries faded away, she knew, she just knew, that this time, Theos was gone for good.

## CHAPTER TWO

Alec ran through the woods in the black of night, Marco at his side, stumbling over roots submerged in the snow and wondering if he would make it out alive. His heart pounded in his chest as he ran for his life, gasping for breath, wanting to stop but needing to keep pace with Marco. He glanced back over his shoulder for the hundredth time and watched as the glow from The Flames grew fainter the deeper into the woods they went. He passed a patch of thick trees, and soon the glow was entirely gone, the two of them immersed in near blackness.

Alec turned and groped his way as he bumped off trees, trunks whacking his shoulders, branches scratching his arms. He peered into the blackness ahead of him, barely making out a path, trying not to listen to the exotic noises all around him. He had been duly warned about these woods, where no escapee survived, and he had a sinking feeling the deeper they went. He sensed the danger here, vicious creatures lurking everywhere, the wood so dense it was hard to navigate and growing more tangled with each step he took. He was starting to wonder if he might have been better off staying back at The Flames.

"This way!" hissed a voice.

Marco grabbed his shoulder and pulled him as he forked right, between two huge trees, ducking beneath their gnarled branches. Alec followed, slipping in the snow, and soon found himself in a clearing in the midst of the thick forest, the moonlight shining through, lighting their way.

They both stopped, bent over, hands on their hips, gasping for breath. They exchanged a glance, and Alec looked back over his shoulder at the wood. He breathed hard, his lungs aching from the cold, his ribs hurting, and wondered.



“Why aren’t they following us?” Alec asked.

Marco shrugged.

“Maybe they know this wood will do their job for them.”

Alec listened for the sound of Pandesian soldiers, expecting to be pursued—but there came none. Instead, though, Alec thought he heard a different sound—like a low, angry snarl.

“Do you hear that?” Alec asked, the hair rising on the back of his neck.

Marco shook his head.

Alec stood there, waiting, wondering if his mind were playing tricks on him. Then, slowly, he began to hear it again. It was a distant noise, a faint snarl, menacing, unlike anything Alec had ever heard. As he listened, it began to grow louder, as if coming closer.

Marco now looked at him with alarm.

“That’s why they didn’t follow,” Marco said, his voice dawning with recognition.

Alec was confused.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Wilvox,” he answered, eyes now filled with fear.

“They’ve unleashed them after us.”

The word Wilvox struck terror in Alec; he had heard of them as a child, and he knew they were rumored to inhabit the Wood of Thorns, but he’d always assumed they were the stuff of legend. They were rumored to be the deadliest creatures of the night—the stuff of nightmares.

The snarling intensified, sounding as if there were several of them.

“RUN!” Marco implored.

Marco turned and Alec joined him as the two of them burst across the clearing and back into the wood. Adrenaline pumped in his veins as Alec ran, hearing his own heartbeat in his ears, drowning out the sound of ice and snow crunching beneath his boots. Soon, though, he heard the

creatures behind him closing in, and he knew they were being hunted by beasts they could not outrun.

Alec stumbled over a root and slammed into a tree; he cried out in pain, winded, then bounced off it and continued to run. He scanned the woods for any escape, realizing their time was short—but there was nothing.

The snarling grew louder, and as he ran, Alec looked back over his shoulder—and immediately wished he hadn't. Bearing down on them were four of the most savage creatures he'd ever laid eyes upon. Resembling wolves, the Wilvox were twice the size, with small sharp horns sticking out the back of their heads, and one large, single red eye between the horns. Their paws were the size of a bear's, with long, pointed claws, and their coats were slick and as black as night.

Seeing them this close, Alec knew he was a dead man.

Alec burst forward with his last ounce of speed, his palms sweating even in the icy cold, his breath frozen in the air before him. The Wilvox were hardly twenty feet away and he knew from the desperate look in their eyes, from the drool hanging from their mouths, that they would tear him to pieces. He saw no means of escape. He looked to Marco, hoping for some sign of a plan—but Marco carried the same look of despair. He clearly had no idea what to do either.

Alec closed his eyes and did something he had never done before: he prayed. Seeing his life flashing before his eyes, it changed him somehow, made him realize how much he cherished life, and made him more desperate than he'd ever been to keep it.

*Please, God, get me out of this. After what I did for my brother, don't let me die here. Not in this place, and not by these creatures. I'll do anything.*

Alec opened his eyes, looked up ahead, and as he did, this time he noticed a tree slightly different than the others. Its branches were more gnarled and hung lower to the ground, just high enough where he could grab one with a

running jump. He had no idea if Wilvox could climb, but he had no other choice.

“That branch!” Alec yelled to Marco, pointing.

They ran for the tree together, and as the Wilvox closed in, but feet away, without pausing, they each jumped up and grabbed the branch, pulling themselves up.

Alec’s hands slipped on the snowy wood, but he managed to hang on, and he pulled himself up until he was grabbing the next branch several feet off the ground. He then immediately jumped up to the next branch, three feet higher, Marco beside him. He had never climbed so fast in his life.

The Wilvox reached them, the pack snarling viciously, jumping and clawing at their feet. Alec felt their hot breath on the back of his heel a moment before he raised his foot, the fangs coming down and missing him by an inch. The two of them kept climbing, propelled by adrenaline, until they were a good fifteen feet off the ground, and safer than they needed to be.

Alec finally stopped, clutching a branch with all his might, catching his breath, sweat stinging his eyes. He looked back down, watching, praying the Wilvox could not climb, too.

To his immense relief, they were still on the ground, snarling and snapping, jumping up for the tree, but clearly unable to climb. They scratched the trunk madly, but to no avail.

The two sat on the branch, and as the reality sank in that they were safe, they each breathed a sigh of relief. Marco burst into laughter, to Alec’s surprise. It was a madman’s laugh, a laugh of relief, the laugh of a man who had been spared from a sure death in the most unlikely way.

Alec, realizing how close they had come, could not help laughing, too. He knew they were still far from safety; he knew they could never leave this spot, and that they would even likely die in this place. But for now, at least, they were safe.

“Looks like I owe you,” Marco said.

Alec shook his head.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Alec said.

The Wilvox were snarling viciously, raising the hair on the back of his neck, and Alec looked up at the tree, hands trembling, wanting to get even farther away and wondering how high they could climb, wondering if they had any way out of here.

Suddenly, Alec froze. As he looked up, he flinched, struck by a terror unlike he had ever known. There, in the branches above him, looking down, was the most hideous creature he had ever seen. Eight feet long, with the body of a snake but with six sets of feet, all with long claws, and a head shaped like an eel’s, it had narrow slits for eyes, dull yellow, and they focused on Alec. Just feet away, it arched its back, hissed, and opened its mouth. Alec, in shock, could not believe how wide it opened—wide enough to swallow him whole. And he knew, from its rattling tail, that it was about to strike—and kill them both.

Its mouth came down right for Alec’s throat, and he reacted involuntarily. He shrieked and jumped back as he lost his grip, Marco beside him, thinking only of getting away from those deadly fangs, that huge mouth, a sure death.

He did not even think about what lay below. As he felt himself flying backwards through the air, flailing, he realized, too late, that he was heading from one set of fangs to another. He glanced back and saw the Wilvox salivating, opening their jaws, nothing he could do but brace himself for the descent.

He had exchanged one death for another.

## CHAPTER THREE

Kyra walked slowly back through the gates of Argos, the eyes of all her father's men upon her, and she burned with shame. She had misread her relationship with Theos. She had thought, stupidly, that she could control him—and instead, he had spurned her before all these men. For the eyes of all to see, she was powerless, had no dominion over a dragon. She was just another warrior—not even a warrior, but just a teenage girl who had led her people into a war they, abandoned by a dragon, could no longer win.

Kyra walked back through the gates of Argos, feeling the eyes on her in the awkward silence. What did they think of her now? she wondered. She did not even know what to think of herself. Had Theos not come for her? Had he only fought this battle for his own ends? Did she have any special powers at all?

Kyra was relieved as the men finally looked away, returned to their looting, all busy gathering weaponry, preparing for war. They rushed to and fro, gathering all the bounty left behind by the Lord's Men, filling carts, leading away horses, the clang of steel ever present as shields and armor were tossed into piles by the handful. As more snow fell and the sky began to darken, they all had little time to lose.

"Kyra," came a familiar voice.

She turned and was relieved to see Anvin's smiling face as he approached her. He looked at her with respect, with the reassuring kindness and warmth of the father figure he had always been. He draped one arm affectionately around her shoulder, smiling wide beneath his beard, and he held out before her a gleaming new sword, its blade etched with Pandesian symbols.

“Finest steel I’ve held in years,” he noted with a broad grin. “Thanks to you, we have enough weapons here to start a war. You have made us all more formidable.”

Kyra took comfort in his words, as she always did; yet she still could not cast off her feeling of depression, of confusion, of being spurned by the dragon. She shrugged.

“I did not do all this,” she replied. “Theos did.”

“Yet Theos returned for *you*,” he replied.

Kyra glanced up at the gray skies, now empty, and she wondered.

“I’m not so sure.”

They both studied the skies in the long silence that followed, broken only by the wind sweeping through.

“Your father awaits you,” Anvin finally said, his voice serious.

Kyra joined Anvin as they walked, snow and ice crunching beneath their boots, winding their way through the courtyard amidst all the activity. They passed dozens of her father’s men as they trekked through the sprawling fort of Argos, men everywhere, finally relaxed for the first time in ages. She saw them laughing, drinking, jostling each other as they gathered weapons and provisions. They were like children on All Hallow’s Day.

Dozens more of her father’s men stood in a line and passed sacks of Pandesian grain, handing them to each other as they piled carts high; another cart clambered by, overflowing with shields that clanked as it went. It was stacked so high that a few fell over the side, soldiers scrambling to gather them back in. All around her carts were heading out of the fort, some on the road back to Volis, others forking off on different roads to places her father had directed, all filled to the brim. Kyra took some solace in the sight, feeling less bad for the war she had instigated.

They turned a corner and Kyra spotted her father, surrounded by his men, busy inspecting dozens of swords and spears as they held them out for his approval. He