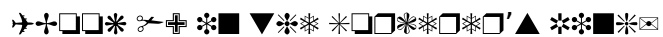
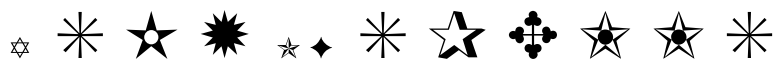


A SKY OF SPELLS

BOOK #9 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 eight books, which has been translated into six languages.

Morgan is also author of the #1 Bestselling THE VAMPIRE LEGACY, a young adult series comprising two books and counting.

Morgan is also author of the #1 Bestselling ARENA ONE and ARENA TWO, the first two books in THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic action thriller set in the future.

Morgan is also author of the #1 Bestselling epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising nine books and counting.

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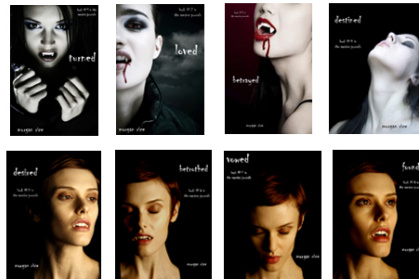
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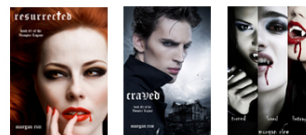
THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY



the vampire journals



the Vampire Legacy



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CONTENTS

[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](#)

“We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
for he today that sheds his blood with me
shall be my brother.”

--William Shakespeare
Henry V

CHAPTER ONE

Thor faced Gwendolyn, holding his sword at his side, his entire body trembling. He looked out and saw all the faces staring back at him in the stunned silence—Alistair, Erec, Kendrick, Steffen, and a host of his countrymen—people he had known and loved. *His* people. Yet here he was, facing them, sword at his side. He was on the wrong side of battle.

Finally, he realized.

Thor's veil had lifted as Alistair's words rang through him, filled him with clarity. He was Thorgrin. A member of the Legion. A member of the Western Kingdom of the Ring. He was not a soldier for the Empire. He did not love his father. He loved all these people.

Most of all, he loved Gwendolyn.

Thor looked down and saw her face, staring up at him with such love, her eyes tearing. He was filled with shame and horror to realize he was facing her, holding this sword. His palms burned with humiliation and regret.

Thor dropped the sword, letting it fall from his hands. He took a step forward and embraced her.

Gwendolyn hugged him back tightly, and he heard her crying, felt her hot tears pouring down his neck. Thor was overwhelmed with remorse, and he could not conceive how it had all happened. It was a blur. All he knew was that he was happy to be back to himself, to have clarity, and to be back with his people.

"I love you," she whispered into his ear. "And I always will."

"I love you with everything that I am," Thor replied.

Krohn whined at his feet, limping over and licking Thor's palm; Thor leaned down and kissed his face.

"I'm sorry," Thor said to him, remembering hitting him as Krohn had defended Gwendolyn. "Please forgive me."

The earth, quaking violently but moments before, finally became still again.

“THORGRIN!” a shriek cut through the air.

Thor turned to see Andronicus. He stepped forward, into the clearing, scowling, his face red with rage. Both armies watched in stunned silence, as father and son faced each other.

“I *command* you!” Andronicus said. “Kill them! Kill them all! I am your father. You listen to me, and to me alone!”

But this time, as Thor stared back at Andronicus, something felt different. Something shifted inside. No longer did Thor view Andronicus as his father, as a family member, as someone he must answer to and give his life for; instead, he saw him as a foe. A monster. Thor no longer felt any obligation to give up his life for this man. On the contrary: he felt a burning rage against him. Here was the man who had ordered the attack on Gwendolyn; here was the man who had killed his fellow countrymen, who had invaded and ransacked his homeland; here was the man who had taken over his own mind, who had held him hostage with his dark sorcery.

This was not a man he loved. Rather, this was a man he wanted to kill more than anything on earth. Father or not.

Thor suddenly felt himself flood with rage. He reached down, picked up his sword, and charged full speed across the clearing, ready to kill his father.

Andronicus looked shocked as Thor charged, raised his sword high, and as Thor brought it down with both hands, with all his might, for his head.

Andronicus raised his huge battle axe at the last second, turning it sideways and blocking the blow with its metal shaft.

Thor did not relent: he swung his sword again and again, going for the kill, and each time Andronicus raised his axe and blocking it. The great clang of the two weapons

meeting rang through the air as both armies watched in silence. Sparks flew with each blow.

Thor screamed and grunted, using every skill he had, hoping to kill his father on the spot. He had to do it, for himself, for Gwendolyn, for all those who had suffered by this monster's hand. With each blow, Thor wanted, more than anything, to wipe out his lineage, his own background, to start fresh again. To choose a different father.

Andronicus, on the defense, only blocked Thor's blows, and did not fight back. Clearly, he was refraining from attacking his son.

"Thorgrin!" Andronicus said, between blows. "You are my son. I do not wish to harm you. I am your father. You have saved my life. I want you alive."

"And I want you dead!" Thor screamed back.

Thor swung down again and again, driving him back, across the clearing, despite Andronicus' great size and strength. Yet still, Andronicus would not swing back at Thor. It was as if he was hoping that Thor would come back to him again.

But this time, Thor would not. Now, finally, Thor knew who he was. Finally, Andronicus' words were free from his head. Thor would rather be dead than at Andronicus's mercy again.

"Thorgrin, you must stop this!" Andronicus cried out. Sparks flew by his face as he blocked a particularly vicious slash with his axe head. "You will force me to kill you, and I do not wish to. You are my son. To kill you would be to kill myself."

"Then kill yourself!" Thor said. "Or if you do not wish to, then I shall do it for you!"

With a great cry Thor leapt up and kicked Andronicus with both feet in the chest, sending him stumbling and landing on his back.

Andronicus looked up, as if stunned that could have happened.

Thor stood over him and raised his sword high to finish him off.

“NO!” shrieked a voice. It was an awful voice, sounding like it erupted from the very depths of hell, and Thor glanced over to see a single man enter the clearing. He wore a long scarlet robe, his face hidden behind a hood, and an unearthly growl erupted from his throat.

Rafi.

Somehow, Rafi had made it back from his battle with Argon. He stood there now, holding both arms out wide at his sides. His sleeves fell as he rose his arms, revealing pale, blistered skin that looked as if it had never seen the sun. He emitted an awful sound from the back of his throat, like a snarl, and as he opened his mouth wide, it grew louder and louder until it filled the air, the low timber vibrating and making Thor’s ears hurt.

The earth began to quake. Thor was knocked off-balance as the entire ground shook. He followed Rafi’s hands and saw before him a sight he would never forget.

The earth began to split in two, a great chasm opening, spreading wider and wider. As it did, soldiers from both sides fell, slipping down, screaming as they hurled down into the ever-growing crevice.

An orange glow emitted from beneath the earth, and there came an awful hissing noise as steam and fog arose.

There appeared a single hand, emerging from the crevice, gripping the earth. The hand was black, lumpy, disfigured, and as it pulled itself up, Thor, to his horror, saw emerging from the earth an awful creature. It was in the shape of a human, but it was entirely black, with large glowing red eyes and long red fangs. A long, black tail dragged behind it. Its body was lumpy, and it looked like a corpse.

It leaned back its head and there came an awful roar, like Rafi’s. It appeared to be some sort of undead creature, summoned from the depths of the hell.

Behind this creature there suddenly emerged another. Then another.

Thousands more of these creatures surfaced, pulling themselves up from the bowels of hell, an army of undead. Rafi's army.

Slowly, they came to Rafi's side, facing Thorgrin and the others.

Thor stared back in shock at this army facing him; as he stood there, his sword still held high, Andronicus suddenly rolled out from under him and retreated back to his army, clearly not wanting to have to confront Thorgrin.

Suddenly, the thousands of creatures rushed towards Thor, flooding the clearing, coming to kill Thor and all of his people.

Thor snapped out of it and raised his sword high as the first creature leapt for him, snarling, claws extended. Thor sidestepped, swung his sword, and chopped off its head. It stumbled to the ground, unmoving, and Thor braced himself for the next one.

These creatures were strong and fast, but one on one, they were no match for Thor and the skilled warriors of the Ring. Thor fought them deftly, killing them left and right. Yet the question was, how many could he could fight at once? He was flooded by thousands of them, from all directions, as was everyone around him.

Thor fell in beside Erec, Kendrick, Srog and the others, each fighting beside each other, watching each other's backs as they swung left and right, taking out two and three creatures at a time. One of them slipped by, grabbed Thor's arm and scratched it, drawing blood, and Thor cried out in pain, swung around and stabbed in the heart, killing it. Thor was a superior fighter, but his arm already throbbed, and he didn't know how long it would be until these creatures took their toll.

First and foremost in his mind, though, was getting Gwendolyn to safety.

“Get her to the back!” Thor shrieked, grabbing Steffen, who was fighting with a monster, and shoving him to Gwen. “NOW!”

Steffen grabbed Gwen and dragged her away, back through the army of soldiers, distancing her from the beasts.

“NO!” Gwen screamed, protesting. “I want to be here with you!”

But Steffen listened dutifully, dragging her back to the rear flank of the battle, protecting her behind the thousands of MacGils and Silver who valiantly stood there and fought back the creatures. Thor, seeing her safe, was relieved, and he turned back and threw himself into the fight with the undead.

Thor tried to summon his Druid power, to fight with his spirit along with his sword; but for some reason, he could not. He was too exhausted from his experience with Andronicus, from Rafi’s mind control, and his power needed more time to heal. He had to fight with conventional weapons.

Alistair stepped forward, by Thor’s side, raised a palm, and directed it at the crowd of undead. A ball of light emanated from it, and she killed several creatures at once.

She raised both palms repeatedly, killing creatures all around her, and as she did, Thor felt inspired, his sister’s energy infusing him. He tried once again to summon some other part of himself, to fight not only with his sword, but with his mind, his spirit. As the next creature approached he raised a palm and tried to summon the wind.

Thor felt the wind rush through his palm, and suddenly, a dozen creatures went flying through the air, the wind driving them, howling as they tumbled back into the crevice in the earth.

Kendrick, Erec and the others, beside Thor, fought valiantly, each killing dozens of creatures, as did all their men around them, letting out a battle cry, as they fought

with all they had. The Empire army sat back and let Rafi's army of undead fight for them, let them weary Thor's men. It was working.

Soon, Thor's men, exhausted, were swinging more slowly. And yet the undead never stopped pouring out from the earth, a never-ending stream.

Thor found himself breathing hard, as were the others. The undead were starting to break through their ranks, and his men were beginning to fall. There were just too many. All around Thor there arose his men's screams as the undead pinned them down, sinking their fangs into the soldiers' throats and sucking out their blood. With each soldier a creature killed, the undead seemed to grow stronger.

Thor knew they had to do something fast. They needed to summon a tremendous power to counteract this, a power stronger than he or Alistair had.

"Argon!" Thor suddenly said to Alistair. "Where is he? We must find him!"

Thor looked over and saw Alistair getting tired, her strength waning; a beast slipped past her, backhanded her, and she fell, screaming. As the beast leapt on top of her, Thor stepped forward and thrust his sword through the creature's back, saving her at the last second.

Thor reached out a hand and yanked her quickly to her feet.

"Argon!" Thor screamed. "He's our only hope. You must find him. Now!"

Alistair gave him a knowing look, and raced into the crowd.

A creature slipped by, his claws plunging for Thor's throat, and Krohn rushed forward and leapt up on it, snarling, pinning it down to the earth. Another creature then plunged onto Krohn's back, and Thor slashed it, killing it.

Another creature jumped onto Erec's back, and Thor rushed forward, pried it off, grabbed it with both hands lifted it high overhead and hurled it into several other creatures, knocking them down. Another beast charged for Kendrick, who did not see it coming, and Thor took his dagger and stabbed it in the throat, right before it sank its fangs into Kendrick's shoulder. Thor felt that this was the least he could do to begin to make up for facing off against Erec and Kendrick and all the others. It felt good to be fighting on their side again, on the right side; it felt good to know who he was again, and to know who he was fighting for.

As Rafi stood there, arms out wide, chanting, thousands more of these beasts were spilling out from the bowels of the earth, and Thor knew that they would not be able to hold them back much longer. A swarm of black enveloped them, as more undead, elbow to elbow, rushed forward. Thor knew that soon, he and all of his people would be consumed.

At least, he thought, he would die on the right side of battle.

CHAPTER TWO

Luanda fought and thrashed as Romulus carried her in his arms, each step taking her farther from her homeland as they crossed the bridge. She screamed and flailed, dug her nails into his skin, did everything possible to free herself. But his arms were too muscular, like rocks, his shoulders too broad, and he wrapped her so tight, holding held her in his grips like a python, squeezing her to death. She could barely breathe, her ribs hurt so badly.

Despite all of that, it was not herself she worried for most. She looked up ahead and saw at the far end of the bridge a vast sea of Empire soldiers, standing there, weapons at the ready, waiting. They were all anxious for the Shield to lower so that they could race onto the bridge. Luanda looked over and saw the strange cloak that Romulus was wearing, vibrating and glowing as he carried her, and she sensed that somehow she was the key to his bringing down the Shield. It must have something to do with her. Why else would he kidnap her?

Luanda felt a fresh determination: she had to free herself—not just for herself, but for her kingdom, her people. When Romulus brought down the Shield, those thousands of men awaiting him would charge across, a vast horde of Empire soldiers, and like locusts, descend on the Ring. They would destroy what was left of her homeland for good, and she could not allow that to happen.

Luanda hated Romulus with everything she had; she hated all of these Empire, and Andronicus most of all. A gale swept through and she felt the cold wind grazing against her bald head, and she groaned as she remembered her shaved head, her humiliation at the hands of these beasts. She would kill each and every one of them if she could.

When Romulus had freed her from being tied up in Andronicus' camp, Luanda had at first thought that she was being spared from a horrible fate, spared from being paraded around like an animal in Andronicus' Empire. But Romulus had turned out to be even worse than Andronicus. She felt certain that as soon as they crossed the bridge, he would kill her—if not torture her first. She had to find some way to escape.

Romulus leaned over and spoke in her ear, a deep, throaty sound which set her hairs on edge.

"It won't be long now, my dear," he said.

She had to think quickly. Luanda was no slave; she was the firstborn daughter of a king. Royal blood ran in her, the blood of warriors, and she feared no one. She would do anything she had to to fight any adversary; even someone as grotesque and powerful as Romulus.

Luanda summoned all of her remaining strength and in one quick motion, she craned back her neck, leaned forward and sank her teeth into Romulus' throat. She bit down with all her might, squeezing harder and harder, until his blood squirted out all over her face and he shrieked, dropping her.

Luanda scurried to her knees, turned and took off, sprinting back across the bridge for her homeland.

She heard his footsteps bearing down on her. He was much faster than she'd imagined and as she glanced back, she saw him bearing down on her with a look of pure rage.

She looked ahead and saw the mainland of the Ring before her, only twenty feet away, and she ran even harder.

Just steps away, Luanda suddenly felt an awful pain in her spine, as Romulus dove forward and dug his elbow down on her back. She felt as if he'd crushed her as she collapsed, face-first, onto the dirt.

A moment later, Romulus was on top of her. He spun her around and punched her in the face. He hit her so hard, her entire body flipped, and she landed back in the dirt. The

pain resonated throughout her jaw, her entire face, as she lay there, barely conscious.

Luanda felt herself being hoisted high over Romulus' head, and she watched with terror as he charged for the edge of the bridge, preparing to cast her over. He screamed as he stood there, holding her high overhead, preparing to throw her.

Luanda looked over, down at the steep drop, and knew her life was about to end.

But Romulus held her there, frozen, at the precipice, arms shaking, and apparently, thought better of it. As her life hung in the balance, it seemed Romulus debated. Clearly, he wanted to throw her over the edge in his fit of rage—yet he could not. He needed her for to fulfill his purpose.

Finally, he lowered her, and wrapped his arms around her even tighter, nearly squeezing the life out of her. He then hurried back across the Canyon, heading back towards his people.

This time, Luanda just hung there limply, reeling from the pain, nothing more she could do. She had tried—and she had failed. Now all she could do was watch her fate approach her, step-by-step, as she was carried across the Canyon, swirling mists rising up and enveloping her, then disappearing just as quickly. Luanda felt as if she were being taken to some other planet, to some place from which she would never return.

Finally, they reached the far side of the Canyon, and as Romulus took his final step, the cloak around his shoulders vibrated with a great noise, glowing a luminescent red. Romulus dropped Luanda on the ground, like an old potato, and she hit the ground hard, banging her head, and lay there.

Romulus's soldiers stood there, at the edge of the bridge, staring out, all of them clearly afraid to step forward and test whether the Shield was truly down.

Romulus, fed up, grabbed a soldier, hoisted him high overhead and threw him onto the bridge, right into the invisible wall that was once the Shield. The soldier raised his hands and screamed, bracing himself for a certain death as he expected to disintegrate.

But this time, something different happened. The soldier went flying through the air, landed on the bridge, and rolled and rolled. The crowd watched in silence as he rolled to a stop—alive.

The soldier turned and sat up and looked back at all of them, the most shocked of all. He had made it. Which could only mean one thing: the Shield was down.

Romulus' army let out a great roar, and as one they all charged. They swarmed onto it, racing for the Ring. Luanda cowered, trying to stay out of the way as they all stampeded past her, like a herd of elephants, heading for her homeland. She watched with dread.

Her country as she knew it was finished.

CHAPTER THREE

Reece stood at the edge of the lava pit, looking down in utter disbelief as the ground shook violently beneath him. He could hardly process what he had just done, his muscles still aching from releasing the boulder, from casting the Destiny Sword into the pit.

He had just destroyed the most powerful weapon in the Ring, the weapon of legend, the sword of his ancestors for generations, the weapon of the Chosen One, the only weapon holding up the Shield. He had hurled it down into a pit of molten fire and with his own eyes had watched it melt, flare up in a great ball of red, then disappear into nothingness.

Gone forever.

The ground had begun shaking since, and it had not stopped. Reece struggled to balance, as did the others, as he backed away from the edge. He felt as if the world were crumbling around him. What had he done? Had he destroyed the Shield? The Ring? Had he made the biggest mistake of his life?

Reece reassured himself by telling himself he had no choice. The boulder and the Sword were simply too heavy for them all to carry out of here—much less to climb the walls with—or to outrun these violent savages. He had been in a desperate situation, and it had called for desperate measures.

Their desperate situation had not changed yet. Reece heard a great screaming all around him, and a sound arose of a thousand of these creatures, chattering their teeth in an unnerving way and laughing and snarling at the same time. It sounded like an army of jackals. Clearly, Reece had

angered them; he had taken away their precious object, and now they all seemed resigned to make him pay.

As bad as the situation had been moments before, now it was even worse. Reece spotted the others—Elden, Indra, O'Connor, Conven, Krog and Serna—all looking down in horror at the lava pit, then turning and looking around in desperation. Thousands of Faws were closing in from every direction. Reece had managed to spare the Sword, but he had not thought past that, had not thought through how to get himself and the others out of danger. They were still completely surrounded, with no way of getting out.

Reece was determined to find a way out, and with the burden of the Sword off their heads, at least now they could move quickly.

Reece drew his sword, and it cut through the air with a distinctive ring. Why sit back and wait for these creatures to attack? At least he would go down fighting.

"CHARGE!" Reece screamed to the others.

They all drew their weapons and rallied behind him, following as he sprinted away from the edge of the lava pit and right into the thick crowd of Faws, swinging his sword every which way, killing them left and right. Beside him, Elden raised his axe and chopped off two heads at a time, while O'Connor drew his bow and fired on the run, taking out all those in his path. Indra rushed forward and with her short sword, stabbed two in the heart, while Conven drew both of his swords and, screaming like a madman, charged forward, swinging wildly and killing Faws in every direction. Serna wielded his mace, and Krog his spear, protecting their rear flank.

They were a unified fighting machine, fighting as one, fighting for their lives, cutting their way through the thick crowd as they desperately tried to escape. Reece led them up a small hill, aiming for the high ground.

They slipped as they went, the ground still shaking, the slope steep, muddy. They lost some momentum, and several

Faws jumped onto Reece, clawing and biting him. He spun and punched them; they were persistent and clung to him, but he managed to throw them off, kicking them back, then stabbing them before they could attack again. Cut and bruised, Reece kept fighting, as they all did, all fighting for their lives to climb the hill and escape from this place.

As they finally reached the high ground, Reece had a moment of reprieve. He stood there, gasping for air, and in the distance, caught a glimpse of the Canyon wall before it was covered by the thick mist. He knew it was out there, their lifeline back to the surface, and he knew they had to reach it.

Reece looked back over his shoulder and saw thousands of Faws racing uphill for them, buzzing, teeth chattering, making an awful noise, louder than ever, and he knew that they would not let them go.

"What about me?" a voice screamed out, cutting through the air.

Reece turned and saw Centra back there. He was still being held captive, beside the leader, and a Faw still held a knife to his throat.

"Don't leave me!" he screamed. "They'll kill me!"

Reece stood there, burning with frustration. Of course, Centra was right: they would kill him. Reece could not leave him there; it would go against Reece's code of honor. After all, Centra had helped them when they'd needed help.

Reece stood there, hesitating. He turned and saw, in the distance, the Canyon wall, the way out, tempting him.

"We can't go back for him!" Indra said, frantic. "They will kill us all."

She kicked a Faw that approached her and it fell backwards, sliding on its back down the slope.

"We'd be lucky to escape with our own lives as it is!" Serna called out.

"He's not one of us!" Krog said. "We can't endanger our group for him!"

Reece stood there, debating. The Faws were getting closer, and he knew he had to make his decision.

"You're right," Reece admitted. "He's not one of us. But he helped us. And he's a good man. I cannot leave him at the mercy of those things. *No man left behind!*" Reece said firmly.

Reece began to head down the slope, to go back for Centra—but before he could, Conven suddenly broke from the group and charged, racing down, leaping and sliding on the muddy slope, feet first, his sword out, sliding downward and slashing as he went, killing Faws left and right. He was hurling back to where they'd come from single-handedly, recklessly, throwing himself into the group of Faws and somehow cutting his way through them with sheer determination.

Reece jumped into action close behind.

"The rest of you stay here!" Reece shouted out. "Wait for our return!"

Reece followed in Conven's tracks, slashing the Faws left and right; he caught up with Conven and provided backup, the two of them fighting their way back down the mountain for Centra.

Conven charged forward, breaking through the crowd of Faws as Reece fought his way all the way to Centra, who stared back, wide-eyed in fear. A Faw raised his dagger to cut Centra's throat, but Reece did not give him the chance: he stepped forward, raised his sword, took aim and threw it with all his might.

The sword went flying through the air, tumbling end over end, and lodged itself through the throat of the Faw, a moment before it killed Centra. Centra screamed as he looked over and saw the dead Faw, just inches away, their faces almost touching.

To Reece's surprise, Conven did not go for Centra; instead he kept running up the small hill, and Reece looked up, horrified to see what he was doing. Conven seemed