

MORGAN RICE



A QUEST OF HEROES

(BOOK #1 IN THE SORCERER'S RING)



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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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“I loved how Morgan Rice built Thor’s character and the world in which he lived. The landscape and the creatures that roamed it were very well described...I enjoyed [the plot]. It was short and sweet....There were just the right amount of minor characters, so I didn’t get confused. There were adventures and harrowing moments, but the action depicted wasn’t overly grotesque. The book would be perfect for a teen reader... The beginnings of something remarkable are there...”

--*San Francisco Book Review*

“In this action-packed first book in the epic fantasy Sorcerer's Ring series (which is currently 14 books strong), Rice introduces readers to 14-year-old Thorgrin "Thor" McLeod, whose dream is to join the Silver Legion, the elite knights who serve the king.... Rice's writing is solid and the premise intriguing.”

--*Publishers Weekly*

“[A QUEST OF HEROES] is a quick and easy read. The ends of chapters make it so that you have to read what happens next and you don’t want to put it down. There are some typos in the book and some names are messed up, but this does not distract from the overall story. The end of the book made me want to get the next book immediately and that is what I did. All nine of the Sorcerer’s Ring series can currently be purchased on the Kindle store and *A Quest of Heroes* is currently free to get you started! If you are looking for a something quick and fun to read while on vacation this book will do nicely.”

--*FantasyOnline.net*

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“Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown.”

—William Shakespeare
Henry IV, Part II

CHAPTER ONE

The boy stood on the highest knoll of the low country in the Western Kingdom of the Ring, looking north, watching the first of the rising suns. As far as he could see stretched rolling green hills, dipping and rising like camel humps in a series of valleys and peaks. The burnt-orange rays of the first sun lingered in the morning mist, making them sparkle, lending the light a magic that matched the boy's mood. He rarely woke this early or ventured this far from home—and never ascended this high—knowing it would incur his father's wrath. But on this day, he didn't care. On this day, he disregarded the million rules and chores that had oppressed him for his fourteen years. For this day was different. It was the day his destiny had arrived.

The boy, Thorgrin of the Western Kingdom of the Southern Province of the clan McLeod—known to all he liked simply as Thor—the youngest of four boys, the least favorite of his father, had stayed awake all night in anticipation of this day. He had tossed and turned, bleary-eyed, waiting, *willing* the first sun to rise. For a day like this arrived only once every several years, and if he missed it, he would be stuck in this village, doomed to tend his father's flock the rest of his days. That was a thought he could not bear.

Conscription Day. It was the one day the King's Army canvassed the provinces and hand-picked volunteers for the King's Legion. As long as he had lived, Thor had dreamt of nothing else. For him, life meant one thing: joining the Silver, the King's elite force of knights, bedecked in the finest armor and the choicest arms anywhere in the two kingdoms. And one could not enter the Silver without first joining the Legion, the company of squires ranging from fourteen to nineteen years of age. And if one was not the son of a noble, or of a famed warrior, there was no other way to join the Legion.

Conscription Day was the only exception, that rare event every few years when the Legion ran low and the King's men scoured the land in search of new recruits. Everyone knew that few commoners were chosen—and that even fewer would actually make the Legion.

Thor studied the horizon intently, looking for any sign of motion. The Silver, he knew, would have to take this, the only road into his village, and he wanted to be the first to spot them. His flock of sheep protested all around him, rising up in a chorus of annoying grunts and urging him to bring them back down the mountain, where the grazing was choicer. He tried to block out the noise, and the stench. He had to concentrate.

What had made all of this bearable, all these years of tending flocks, of being his father's lackey, his older brothers' lackey, the one cared for least and burdened most, was the idea that one day he would leave this place. One day, when the Silver came, he would surprise all those who had underestimated him and be selected. In one swift motion, he would ascend their carriage and say goodbye to all of this.

Thor's father, of course, had never considered him seriously as a candidate for the Legion—in fact, he had never considered him as a candidate for anything. Instead, his father devoted his love and attention to Thor's three older brothers. The oldest was nineteen and the others but a year behind each other, leaving Thor a good three years younger than any of them. Perhaps because they were closer in age, or perhaps because they looked alike and looked nothing like Thor, the three of them stuck together, barely acknowledging Thor's existence.

Worse, they were taller and broader and stronger than he, and Thor, who knew he was not short, nonetheless felt small beside them, felt his muscular legs frail compared to their barrels of oak. His father made no move to rectify any of this—and in fact seemed to relish it—leaving Thor to attend the sheep and sharpen weapons while his brothers were left to train. It was never spoken, but always understood, that Thor would spend his life in the wings, be forced to watch his brothers achieve great things. His destiny, if his father and brothers had their way, would be to stay here, swallowed by this village, and give his family the support they demanded.

Worse still was that Thor sensed his brothers, paradoxically, were threatened by him, maybe even hated him. Thor could see it in their every glance, their every gesture. He didn't understand how, but he aroused something, like fear, or jealousy, in them. Perhaps it was because he was different from them, didn't look like them or speak with their mannerisms; he didn't even dress like them, his father reserving the best—the purple and scarlet robes, the gilded weapons—for his brothers, while Thor was left wearing the coarsest of rags.

Nonetheless, Thor made the best of what he had, finding a way to make his clothes fit, tying the frock with a sash around his waist, and, now that summer was here, cutting off the sleeves to allow his toned arms to be caressed by the breezes. His shirt was matched by coarse linen pants—his only pair—and boots made of the poorest leather, laced up his shins. They were hardly the leather of his brothers' shoes, but he made them work. His was the typical uniform of a herder.

But he hardly had the typical demeanor. Thor stood tall and lean, with a proud jaw, noble chin, high cheekbones, and gray eyes, looking like a displaced warrior. His straight, brown hair fell back in waves on his head, just past his ears, and behind the locks, his eyes glistened like minnows in the light.

Thor's brothers would be allowed to sleep in this morning, given a hearty meal, and sent off for the Selection with the finest weapons and his father's blessing—while he would not even be allowed to attend. He had tried to raise the issue with his father once. It had not gone well. His father had summarily ended the conversation, and he had not tried again. It just wasn't fair.

Thor was determined to reject the fate his father had planned for him. At the first sign of the royal caravan, he would race back to the house, confront his father, and, like it or not, make himself known to the King's men. He would stand for selection with the others. His father could not stop him. He felt a knot in his stomach at the thought of it.

The first sun rose higher, and when the second sun, mint green, began to rise, adding a layer of light to the purple sky, Thor spotted them.

He stood upright, hairs on end, electrified. There, on the horizon, came the faintest outline of a horse-drawn carriage, its wheels kicking dust into the sky. His heart beat faster as another came into view; then another. Even from here the golden carriages gleamed in the suns, like silver-backed fish leaping from the water.

By the time he counted twelve of them, he could wait no longer. Heart pounding in his chest, forgetting his flock for the first time in his life, Thor turned and stumbled down the hill, determined to stop at nothing until he made himself known.

*

Thor barely paused to catch his breath as he sped down the hills, through the trees, scratched by branches and not caring. He reached a clearing and saw his village spread out below: a sleepy country town packed with one-story, white clay homes with thatched roofs. There were but several dozen families amongst them. Smoke rose from chimneys as most were up early preparing their morning meal. It was an idyllic place, just far enough—a full day's ride—from

King's Court to deter passersby. Just another farming village on the edge of the Ring, another cog in the wheel of the Western Kingdom.

Thor burst down the final stretch, into the village square, kicking up dirt as he went. Chickens and dogs ran out of his way, and an old woman, squatting outside her home before a cauldron of bubbling water, hissed at him.

"Slow down, boy!" she screeched as he raced past, stirring dust into her fire.

But Thor would not slow—not for her, not for anybody. He turned down one side street, then another, twisting and turning the way he knew by heart, until he reached home.

It was a small, nondescript dwelling like all the others, with its white clay walls and angular, thatched roof. Like most, its single room was divided, his father sleeping on one side and his three brothers on the other; unlike most, it had a small chicken coop in the back, and it was here that Thor was exiled to sleep. At first he'd bunked with his brothers; but over time they had grown bigger and meaner and more exclusive, and made a show of not leaving him room. Thor had been hurt, but now he relished his own space, preferring to be away from their presence. It just confirmed for him that he was the exile in his family that he already knew he was.

Thor ran to his front door and burst through it without stopping.

"Father!" he yelled, gasping for breath. "The Silver! They're coming!"

His father and three brothers sat hunched over the breakfast table, already dressed in their finest. At his words they jumped up and darted past him, bumping his shoulders as they ran out of the house and into the road.

Thor followed them out, and they all stood watching the horizon.

"I see no one," Drake, the oldest, answered in his deep voice. With the broadest shoulders, hair cropped short like his brothers', brown eyes, and thin, disapproving lips, he scowled down at Thor, as usual.

"Nor do I," echoed Dross, just a year below Drake, always taking his side.

"They're coming!" Thor shot back. "I swear!"

His father turned to him and grabbed his shoulders sternly.

"And how would you know?" he demanded.

"I saw them."

"How? From where?"

Thor hesitated; his father had him. He of course knew the only place Thor could have spotted them was from the top of that knoll. Now Thor was unsure how to respond.

"I... climbed the knoll—"

"With the flock? You know they are not to go that far."

"But today was different. I had to see."

His father glowered down.

"Go inside at once and fetch your brothers' swords and polish their scabbards, so they look their best before the King's men arrive."

His father, done with him, turned back to his brothers, who all stood in the road looking out.

"Do you think they'll choose us?" asked Durs, the youngest of the three, a full three years ahead of Thor.

"They'd be foolish not to," his father said. "They are short on men this year. It has been a slim cropping—or else they wouldn't bother coming. Just stand straight, the three of you, keep your chins up and chests out. Do not look them directly in the eye, but do not look away, either. Be strong and confident. Show no weakness. If you want to be in the King's Legion, you must act as if you're already in it."

“Yes, Father,” his three boys answered at once, getting into position.

He turned and glared back at Thor.

“What are you still doing there?” he asked. “Get inside!”

Thor stood there, torn. He didn’t want to disobey his father, but he had to speak with him. His heart pounded as he debated. He decided it would be best to obey, to bring the swords, and then confront his father. Disobeying outright wouldn’t help.

Thor raced into the house, out through the back and to the weapons shed. He found his brothers’ three swords, objects of beauty all of them, crowned with the finest silver hilts, precious gifts for which his father had toiled years. He grabbed all three, surprised as always at their weight, and ran back through the house with them.

He sprinted to his brothers, handed each a sword, then turned to his father.

“What, no polish?” Drake said.

His father turned to him disapprovingly, but before he could say anything, Thor spoke up.

“Father, please. I need to speak with you!”

“I told you to polish—”

“Please, Father!”

His father glared back, debating. He must have seen the seriousness on Thor’s face, because finally, he said, “Well?”

“I want to be considered. With the others. For the Legion.”

His brothers’ laughter rose up behind him, making his face burn red.

But his father did not laugh; on the contrary, his scowl deepened.

“Do you?” he asked.

Thor nodded back vigorously.

“I’m fourteen. I’m eligible.”

“The cutoff is fourteen,” Drake said disparagingly, over his shoulder. “If they took you, you’d be the youngest. Do you think they’d choose you over someone like me, five years your elder?”

“You are insolent,” Durs said. “You always have been.”

Thor turned to them. “I’m not asking you,” he said.

He turned back to his father, who still frowned.

“Father, please,” he said. “Allow me a chance. That’s all I ask. I know I’m young, but I will prove myself, over time.”

His father shook his head.

“You’re not a soldier, boy. You’re not like your brothers. You’re a herder. Your life is here. With me. You will do your duties and do them well. One should not dream too high. Embrace your life, and learn to love it.”

Thor felt his heart breaking as he saw his life collapsing before his eyes.

No, he thought. *This can’t be.*

“But Father—”

“Silence!” he shrieked, so shrill it cut the air. “Enough with you. Here they come. Get out of the way, and best mind your manners while they’re here.”

His father stepped up and with one hand pushed Thor to the side, as if he were an object he’d rather not see. His beefy palm stung Thor’s chest.

A great rumbling arose, and townfolk poured out from their homes, lining the streets. A growing cloud of dust heralded the caravan, and moments later they arrived, a dozen horse-drawn carriages, with a noise like great thunder.

They came into town like a sudden army, halting close to Thor's home. Their horses , pranced in place, snorting. It took a long time for the cloud of dust to settle, and Thor anxiously tried to steal a peek at their armor, their weaponry. He had never been this close to the Silver before, and his heart thumped.

The soldier on the lead stallion dismounted. Here he was, a real, actual member of the Silver, covered in shiny ring mail, a long sword on his belt. He looked to be in his thirties, a real man, stubble on his face, scars on his cheek, and a nose crooked from battle. He was the most substantial man Thor had ever seen, twice as wide as the others, with a countenance that said he was in charge.

The soldier jumped down onto the dirt road, his spurs jingling as he approached the lineup of boys.

Up and down the village dozens of boys stood at attention, hoping. Joining the Silver meant a life of honor, of battle, of renown, of glory—along with land, title, and riches. It meant the best bride, the choicest land, a life of glory. It meant honor for your family, and entering the Legion was the first step.

Thor studied the large, golden carriages, and knew they could only hold so many recruits. It was a large kingdom, and they had many towns to visit. He gulped, realizing his chances were even more remote than he thought. He would have to beat out all these other boys—many of them substantial fighters—along with his own three brothers. He had a sinking feeling.

Thor could hardly breathe as the soldier paced in silence, surveying the rows of hopefuls. He began on the far side of the street, then slowly circled. Thor knew all the other boys, of course. He also knew some of them secretly did not want to be picked, even though their families wanted to send them off. They were afraid; they would make poor soldiers.

Thor burned with indignity. He felt he deserved to be picked as much as any of them. Just because his brothers were older and bigger and stronger didn't mean he shouldn't have a right to stand and be chosen. He burned with hatred for his father, and nearly burst out of his skin as the soldier approached.

The soldier stopped, for the first time, before his brothers. He looked them up and down, and seemed impressed. He reached out, grabbed one of their scabbards, and yanked it, as if to test how firm it was.

He broke into a smile.

"You haven't yet used your sword in battle, have you?" he asked Drake.

Thor saw Drake nervous for the first time in his life. Drake swallowed.

"No, my liege. But I've used it many times in practice, and I hope to—"

"In *practice!*"

The soldier roared with laughter and turned to the other soldiers, who joined in, laughing in Drake's face.

Drake turned bright red. It was the first time Thor had ever seen Drake embarrassed—usually, it was Drake embarrassing others.

"Well then I shall certainly tell our enemies to fear you—you who wields your sword *in practice!*"

The crowd of soldiers laughed again.

The soldier then turned to Thor's other brothers.

"Three boys from the same stock," he said, rubbing the stubble on his chin. "That can be useful. You're all a good size. Untested, though. You'll need much training if you are to make the cut."

He paused.

“I suppose we can find room.”

He nodded toward the rear wagon.

“Get in, and be quick of it. Before I change my mind.”

Thor’s three brothers sprinted for the carriage, beaming. Thor noticed his father beaming, too.

But he was crestfallen as he watched them go.

The soldier turned and moved on to the next home. Thor could stand it no longer.

“Sire!” Thor yelled out.

His father turned and glared at him, but Thor no longer cared.

The soldier stopped, his back to him, and slowly turned.

Thor took two steps forward, his heart beating, and stuck out his chest as far as he could.

“You haven’t considered me, sire,” he said.

The soldier, startled, looked Thor up and down as if he were a joke.

“Haven’t I?” he asked, and burst into laughter.

His men burst into laughter, too. But Thor didn’t care. This was his moment. It was now or never.

“I want to join the Legion!” Thor said.

The soldier stepped toward Thor.

“Do you now?”

He looked amused.

“And have you even reached your fourteenth year?”

“I did, sire. Two weeks ago.”

“*Two weeks ago!*”

The soldier shrieked with laughter, as did the men behind them.

“In that case, our enemies shall surely quiver at the sight of you.”

Thor felt himself burning with indignity. He had to do something. He couldn’t let it end like this. The soldier turned to walk away—but Thor could not allow it.

Thor stepped forward and yelled: “Sire! You are making a mistake!”

A horrified gasp spread through the crowd, as the soldier stopped and once again slowly turned.

Now he was scowling.

“Stupid boy,” his father said, grabbing Thor by his shoulder, “go back inside!”

“I shall not!” Thor yelled, shaking off his father’s grip.

The soldier stepped toward Thor, and his father backed away.

“Do you know the punishment for insulting the Silver?” the soldier snapped.

Thor’s heart pounded, but he knew he could not back down.

“Please forgive him, sire,” his father said. “He’s a young child and—”

“I’m not speaking to you,” the soldier said. With a withering look, he forced Thor’s father to turn away.

The soldier turned back to Thor.

“Answer me!” he said.

Thor swallowed, unable to speak. This was not how he saw it going in his head.

“To insult the Silver is to insult the King himself,” Thor said meekly, reciting what he’d learned from memory.

“Yes,” the soldier said. “Which means I can give you forty lashes if I choose.”

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