

AN OATH OF BROTHERS

(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, Portugese, Japanese, Chinese, Swedish, Dutch, Turkish, Hungarian, Czech and Slovak (with more languages forthcoming).

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- "Rice does a great job of pulling you into the story from the beginning, utilizing a great descriptive quality that transcends the mere painting of the setting....Nicely written and an extremely fast read."
- --Black Lagoon Reviews (regarding *Turned*)
- "An ideal story for young readers. Morgan Rice did a good job spinning an interesting twist...Refreshing and unique. The series focuses around one girl...one extraordinary girl!...Easy to read but extremely fast-paced... Rated PG."
- -- The Romance Reviews (regarding *Turned*)
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- "Morgan Rice proves herself again to be an extremely talented storyteller....This would appeal to a wide range of audiences, including younger fans of the vampire/fantasy genre. It ended with an unexpected cliffhanger that leaves you shocked."
- -- The Romance Reviews (regarding *Loved*)

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THE SORCERER'S RING





































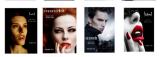


















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CHAPTER ONE

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 maining; 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 kinks 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.

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