

A
REIGN
OF
STEEL

BOOK #11 IN THE SORCERER'S RING

MORGAN RICE

A REIGN OF STEEL

(BOOK #11 IN THE SORCERER'S RING)

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About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 Bestselling author of THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, a young adult series comprising ten books (and counting), which has been translated into six languages. The first book in the series, TURNED, is available as a free download!

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 eleven books and counting. The first book in the series, A QUEST OF HEROES, is available as a free download!

Morgan loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.morganricebooks.com to stay in touch.

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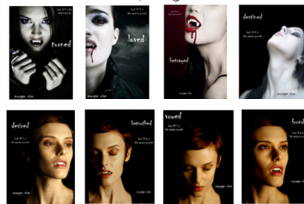
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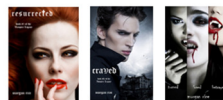
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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

“There is a land where food once grew—but its place was transformed, resembling fire. It was a place where stones were sapphires, and it had dust of gold.”

“The horse laughs at fear, afraid of nothing; he does not shy from the sword. He cannot stand still when the trumpet sounds. At the blast of the trumpet, he snorts: ‘Hurrah!’”

--The Book of Job

CHAPTER ONE

Reece stood, the dagger in his hand impaled in Tirus's chest, frozen in a moment of shock. His entire world spun in slow motion, all of life a blur. He had just killed his worst enemy, the man responsible for Selese's death. For that, Reece felt a tremendous feeling of satisfaction, of vengeance. Finally, a great wrong had been set right.

Yet at the same time, Reece felt numb to the world, felt the odd feeling of preparing to greet death, bracing himself for the demise that would surely follow. The room was filled with Tirus's men, all of whom stood there, also frozen in shock, all witnessing the event. Reece braced himself for death. Yet he had no regrets. He felt grateful that he had even been given a chance to kill this man, who dared to think that Reece would ever actually apologize to him.

Reece knew that death was inevitable; he was too outnumbered in this room, and the only people in this great hall that were on his side were Matus and Srog. Srog, wounded, was bound with ropes, captive, and Matus stood beside him, under the watchful eye of the soldiers. They would be of little help against this army of Upper Islanders loyal to Tirus.

But before Reece died, he wanted to complete his revenge, and to take out as many of these Upper Islanders as he could.

Tirus slumped down to Reece's feet, dead, and Reece did not hesitate: he extracted his dagger and immediately spun and sliced the throat of Tirus's general, standing beside him; in the same motion, Reece whipped around and stabbed another general in the heart.

As the shocked room began to react, Reece moved quickly. He drew both swords from the scabbards of the two dying men, and charged the group of soldiers facing him. He killed four of them before they had a chance to react.

Hundreds of warriors finally broke into action, descending on Reece from all sides. Reece summoned all his training in the Legion, all the times he been forced to fight against groups of men, and as they encircled him, he raised his sword with both hands. He wasn't weighed down by armor, like these other men, or by a belt full of weapons, or a shield; he was lighter and faster than them all, and he was enraged, cornered in, and fighting for his life.

Reece fought valiantly, faster than all of them, remembering all those times he had sparred against Thor, the greatest warrior he'd ever fought, remembering how much his skills had been sharpened. He took down man after man, his sword clanging against countless others, sparks flying as he fought in every direction. He swung and swung until his arms grew heavy, cutting down a dozen men before they could blink.

But more and more men poured in. There were just too many of them. For every six that fell, a dozen more appeared, and the crowd grew thick as they rallied and pressed on him from all sides. Reece was breathing hard as he felt a sword slash his arm, and he screamed out, blood coming from his bicep. He swung around and stabbed the man in the ribs, but the damage had already been done. He was wounded now, and still more men appeared from every side. He knew his time had come.

At least, he realized, grateful, he was able to go down in an act of valor.

“REECE!”

A shriek suddenly pierced the air, a voice that Reece recognized immediately.

A woman's voice.

Reece's body went numb as he realized whose voice it was. It was the voice of the one woman left in the world who could catch his attention, even in the midst of this great battle, even in the midst of his dying moments:

Stara.

Reece looked up and saw her standing high atop the wooden bleachers that lined the sides of the room. She stood high above the crowd, her expression fierce, veins bulging in her throat as she screamed for him. He saw she held a bow and arrow, and he watched as she took aim up high, at an object across the room.

Reece followed her gaze, and he realized what she aimed for: a thick rope, fifty feet long, anchoring an immense metal chandelier thirty feet in diameter, dropping to an iron hook in the stone floor. The fixture was as thick as a tree trunk, and held several hundred flaming candles.

Reece realized: Stara aimed to shoot out the cord. If she hit, it would send the chandelier crashing down—and it would crush half the men in this room. And as Reece looked up, he realized that he was standing right underneath it.

She was warning him to move.

Reece's heart pounded in panic as he turned and lowered his sword and charged wildly into his group of attackers, rushing to get out before it fell. He kicked and elbowed and head-butted soldiers out of his way as he burst through the group. Reece remembered from childhood what a great shot Stara was—always outdoing the boys—and he knew her aim would be true. Even though he ran with his back exposed to the men chasing him, he trusted her, knowing she would hit.

A moment later Reece heard the sound of an arrow slicing through the air, of a great rope snapping, then of a massive piece of iron releasing, plummeting straight down, rushing through

the air at full speed. There came a tremendous crash, the entire room shaking, the vibration knocking Reece off his feet. Reece felt the wind on his back, the chandelier missing him by just a few feet as he fell to the stone on his hands and knees.

Reece heard the screams of men, and he looked over his shoulder and saw the damage Stara had done: dozens of men lay crushed beneath the chandelier, blood everywhere, crying out, pinned to their deaths. She had saved his life.

Reece scrambled to his feet, looking for Stara, and saw that she was in danger now. Several men were closing in on her, and while she took aim with her bow and arrow, he knew there were only so many shots she could get off.

She turned and looked nervously to the door, clearly thinking they could escape that way. But as Reece followed her glance, his heart dropped to see dozens of Tirus's men rush forward and block it, barring the two huge double doors with a thick wooden beam.

They were trapped, all exits blocked. Reece knew they would die here.

Reece saw Stara looking about the room, frantic, until her eyes settled on the uppermost row of the wooden bleachers along the back wall.

She gestured to Reece as she ran for it, and he had no idea what she had in mind. He saw no exit there. But she knew this castle better than he, and perhaps had an escape route in mind that he could not see.

Reece turned and ran, fighting his way through the men as they began to regroup and attack him. As he sprinted through the crowd, he fought minimally, trying not to engage them too much, but rather trying to cut a singular path through the men and make his way to the far corner of the room.

As he ran, Reece looked over at Srog and Matus, determined to help them, too, and he was happily surprised to see that Matus had grabbed the swords of his captors and had stabbed them both; he watched as Matus quickly cut Srog's cords, freeing Srog, who grabbed a sword and killed several soldiers who approached.

"Matus!" Reece screamed.

Matus turned and looked to him, and he saw Stara along the far wall and saw where Reece was running. Matus yanked Srog, and they turned and ran for it, too, all of them now heading in the same direction.

As Reece fought his way through the room, it began to open up. There were not as many soldiers here in this far corner of the room, far away from the opposite corner, from the barred exit where all the soldiers were converging. Reece hoped that Stara knew what she was doing.

Stara ran along the wooden bleachers, jumping higher and higher up the rows, kicking men in the face as they reached up to grab her. As Reece watched her, trying to catch up, he still did not know exactly where she was going, or what her plan could be.

Reece reached the far corner and jumped up onto the bleachers, jumping onto the first wooden row, then the next, then the next, climbing higher and higher, till he was a good ten feet above the crowd, on the farthest, highest wooden bench against the wall. He met up with Stara, and they converged against the far wall with Matus and Srog. They had a good lead on the other soldiers, except for one: he rushed Stara from behind, and Reece lunged forward and stabbed him through the heart, right before he brought a dagger down on Stara's back.

Stara raised her bow and turned to two soldiers lunging for Reece's exposed back, swords drawn, and took out them both.

The four of them stood, backs to the wall in the far corner of the room, on the highest bleacher, and Reece looked out and saw a hundred men race across the room, closing in on them. They were trapped now in this corner, with nowhere to go.

Reece did not understand why Stara had led them all here. Seeing no possible means of escape, he was certain that they would soon all be dead.

“What is your plan?” he yelled to her, as they stood side by side, fighting off men. “There is no way out!”

“Look up,” she replied.

Reece craned his neck and saw above them another iron chandelier, with a long rope leading from it all the way down to the floor, right beside him.

Reece’s brow furrowed in confusion.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“The rope,” she said. “Grab it. All of you. And hold on for dear life.”

They did as she instructed, each grabbing the rope with both hands and holding tight. Suddenly, Reece realized what Stara was about to do.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” he called out.

But it was too late.

As a dozen soldiers approached them, Stara grabbed Reece’s sword, jumped into Reece’s arms, and slashed the rope beside them, the one holding the chandelier.

Reece felt his stomach drop as suddenly the four of them, clutching onto the rope and each other, shot up high into the air at a dizzying speed, grabbing on for dear life as the iron chandelier plummeted down. It crushed the men below them and propelled the four of them high into the air, swinging from the rope.

The rope finally stopped, and the four of them hung there, swinging in the air, a good fifty feet above the hall.

Reece looked down, sweating, almost losing his grip.

“There!” Stara called out.

Reece turned and saw the huge stained-glass window before them, and realized her plan. The coarse rope cut Reece’s palms, and he started to slip with the sweat. He didn’t know how much longer he could hold on.

“I’m losing my grip!” Srog called out, trying his best to hold on despite his injuries.

“We need to swing!” Stara yelled. “We need momentum! Kick off the wall!”

Reece followed her lead: he leaned forward with his boot against the wall and together, they shoved off the wall, the rope swinging more and more wildly. They shoved again and again, until with one final kick, they swung all the way back, like a pendulum, and then they all, shouting, braced themselves as they swung right for the enormous stained-glass window.

The glass exploded, raining down all around them, and the four of them let go, dropping onto the wide stone platform at the base of the window.

Standing there, perched fifty feet above the room, the cold air rushing in, Reece looked down below, and on one side he saw the inside of the hall, hundreds of soldiers looking up at them, wondering how to pursue; on the other side he saw outside the fort. It was pouring outside, driving wind and blinding rain, and the drop below was a good thirty feet, certainly enough to break a leg. But Reece, at least, saw several tall bushes below, and he also saw that the ground was wet and soft with mud. It would be a long, hard fall; but maybe they would be cushioned enough.

Suddenly, Reece screamed out as he felt metal piercing his flesh. He looked down and grabbed his arm and realized an arrow had just grazed it, drawing blood. It was a minor wound, but it stung.

Reece turned and checked back down over his shoulder, and saw that dozens of Tirus's men were aiming bows and firing, arrows whizzing by them now from every direction.

Reece knew there was no time. He looked over and saw Stara standing on one side of him, Matus and Srog on the other, all of them wide-eyed with fear at the drop before them. He grabbed Stara's hand, knowing it was now or never.

Without a word, all of them knowing what needed to be done, they jumped together. They shrieked as they dropped through the air in the blinding rain and wind, flailing and falling, and Reece could not help but wonder if he'd just leapt from one certain death to another.

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