



MORGAN RICE

(ALTERNATE OPENING)

A QUEST OF HEROES

(BOOK #1 IN THE SORCERER'S RING)

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About 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 twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising three books; of the epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books; and of the new epic fantasy series OF CROWNS AND GLORY. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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--Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos

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—Kirkus Reviews

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--San Francisco Book Review

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--Publishers Weekly

“A spirited fantasyOnly the beginning of what promises to be an epic young adult series.”

--Midwest Book Review

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KINGS AND SORCERERS



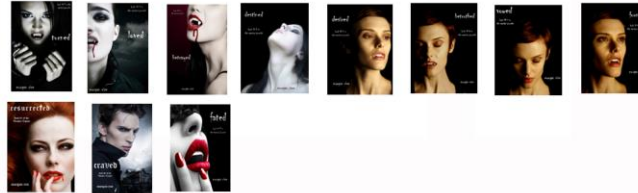
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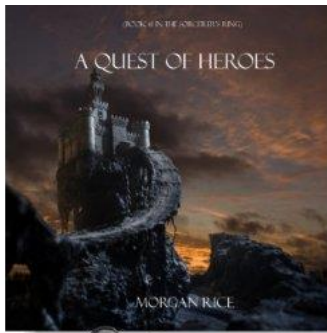


THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY



the vampire journals





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(ALTERNATE)

CHAPTER ONE

Alistair rode through the woods atop her golden carriage, seated in a pile of furs, pulled by two of the finest mares in the kingdom and surrounded by fifty of her closest servants—and inside, her heart was breaking. Wearing the regal outfit of a Queen, draped in silks and furs, laden with jewels, Alistair sat with a Queen's demeanor, perfectly erect, seeming much wiser and older than her nineteen years. She had a regal, dignified air, one that had always made everyone around her rush to serve her. It was what had made her such a beloved Queen, even at her young age. Yet soon, she knew, that was all about to change.

The sun broke through the wood, lighting her long, golden hair, her sparkling blue eyes, her chiseled face. She narrowed her eyes, but did not raise a hand, keeping her composure. Alistair knew, from the time she had been born, that *regal* was what was expected of her. Along with humility. She had heard people say many times that she was the most beautiful girl in the kingdoms, the very picture of grace and nobility come to life, and yet she didn't pay much attention, and never let it affect her modesty. Alistair judged people based on their actions, not their looks.

Yet, for the first time in her life, as she traveled through this strange and foreign wood, wound her way slowly through its trails, Alistair did not feel regal. She felt forlorn, devastated. Her heart was aching from the news she had received, the shocking revelation which had propelled her to come all this way, to leave her lands, her kingdom, to travel across the sea and come here to the Ring. She had learned, to her horror, who her father was, and it had torn her apart, torn apart all her dreams of being born of noble parents, torn apart her very vision of herself. It had driven her here, all the way across the sea, to do the only thing left she could do: to walk away from her life.

Upon hearing the news of her birth, Alistair felt that she no longer deserved to be Queen, no longer deserved to rule over her people. She had left behind her thousands of subjects and had allowed only these last fifty servants to remain, only to accompany her this far on the voyage, and now that they had arrived safely in the Ring, she had no more need of them. Now, the time had come.

"I wish to stop here," Alistair commanded softly.

Immediately, her carriage came to a halt. Her servants gathered in close, eager to do her bidding. They would all die for her, she knew. She loved them for it, and the only thing left that broke her heart was having to walk away from them.

"My lady, your command?" asked one of her men.

They all looked up at her in wonder and anticipation, all wanting to know, as they had ever since they'd begun this journey, where she was going. The idea of telling them pained her. They would soon know that she was not leading them anywhere, not to any great castle in any great faraway land; rather, she was journeying to a place of anonymity. To punish herself for the news, Alistair had decided to strip herself of everything she loved, of all her most precious possessions, all her trappings of wealth, power, fame. She needed to get lost in herself, to reflect, to try to understand and to reconcile who she was with who her father was. Otherwise, she could not go on living.

"Set me down," she commanded.

Servants rushed forward and took her hand and helped her off her carriage, down to the forest floor, and they stood there, looking at her in wonder.

She turned slowly and faced them all, as they all crowded in.

“You shall have my carriage,” she began, “and all that is in it. All the gold and jewels and treasures that I own—they are all yours now. There is enough to sustain you and your families for many lifetimes. Take it all back with you, across the sea, and live as wealthy men. Take all my possessions: I shall not be needing them anymore.”

Alistair reached up, took the bejeweled crown off her head, and reached out to hand it to one of her servants.

He did not reach for it; instead, his eyes opened wide in horror and he pulled back his hands as if she were offering him a snake.

“My lady, may the gods forbid!” he exclaimed. “That is your crown. You are our Queen. It should never leave your head. And I would never touch it.”

“Nor would any of us!” echoed the others.

“My lady, what propels you to even remove it?” asked another.

Alistair looked about at all the sad faces and slowly, sadly, she shook her head, as she set her crown down on the carriage.

“I am not your Queen anymore,” she said. “I am abdicating my throne, all titles, all possessions. I wish for you to take all that I have and leave me, and return across the sea to your families. That is my final command.”

A tense silence lingered in the wood, as they all stared back at her, dumbfounded.

“Just leave you here, alone, my Queen, in the midst of a foreign and hostile forest?”

“Why, my Queen?” another asked.

Alistair only shook her head; they would not understand. How could they understand the depths of her grief, her shame?

“You are the finest Queen we’ve ever had,” another said. “We need you. Our people need you.”

Alistair slowly shook her head.

“You took a vow, all of you, to serve me. Whatever my command. And this is my final command: leave me. Return to our homeland. Take all that is mine. And know how much I love you.”

They all looked down to the ground sadly, their eyes welling with tears, and a long silence followed, punctured only by the occasional cry of an unfamiliar bird. None of her men seemed able to move, all frozen to the spot.

“And will you ever return to us?” one of them finally asked, his voice broken with grief.

Alistair met his eyes, saw the love in them, and her own eyes welled with tears. Deep down, she felt she would not.

“Whether I return or not,” she replied, “I shall always be with you in my heart.”

Alistair gently stroked her horses’ faces, leaned in and kissed them, as a tear rolled down her cheek onto one horse’s nose. They whinnied, lifting their heads and rubbing them against her cheek. She had loved them more than she could say, had known them since the time she could walk. It agonized her to leave them, as much as it did her people.

Alistair took a deep breath; she knew that if she didn’t turn away soon she would burst into tears. The time was now.

“Go!” she called out, firmly enough that they would heed her command.

Slowly, one at a time, her people turned away, leading away the horses, the carriage, all that was hers, her crown still sitting on top.

Alistair turned her back so that she would not have to watch them go. She took a deep breath and took her first step, walking alone, boldly, into a deep and dark forest, determined to start her life anew.

Alistair stood before the small pond in the forest clearing, looking down at her reflection rippling in the water, and she wondered. She saw her face reflected back, her crystal blue eyes, her long blond hair, all of it looking so pure, almost like a statue. She could not understand. How was it possible? How could she be so different from her father? How could she hail from such a monster? How could his blood flow within her veins? Was she destined to become a monster, too? If she was, wouldn't it be better to end it all now?

Alistair, barefoot, having removed her diamond-studded shoes, stood on the sand and took her first step into the icy cold water. She closed her eyes as she felt a chill run up the soles of her feet, and it brought her into the present moment. Alistair felt the freezing waters cleansing her of her sins. Of her father's sins.

Alistair took another step, thinking of her father's crimes, then another. She cried as she went, feeling hollowed out, with nothing left now—no people, no castle, no possessions. All she had left in this world was a brother she'd never met, and a mother she only dreamed of.

Alistair took another step into the water, crying, wanting to tear out that part of her that held her father. But she knew she could not.

So the next best thing, she knew, would be to end it all.

Alistair took yet another step, now up to her thighs, as a cold breeze swept through, chilling her to the bone. The sky darkened, as if witnessing it all, as if crying for what she was about to do.

Alistair took one more step, the water up to her waist, when there came the distinctive sound of a snapping twig—accompanied by a dark, foreboding voice:

“Out for a swim, are you?”

A sinister voice, it sent a chill up her spine; on its heels came cruel laughter—not of a lone man, but of many. Alistair felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise. Her moment of perfect stillness, just when she had expected to end it all, was shattered.

Alistair turned to see a band of ruffians emerging from the wood. Slovenly, unshaven, dressed in rags, perhaps in their twenties, with greasy hair and dark eyes, scars marking their faces, they wore daggers at their belts and walked menacingly toward her. She counted six of them. They looked her up and down and licked their lips, practically drooling at the sight of her. They smiled wide, revealing rotting and missing teeth.

“Already half undressed,” one said to the other, keeping his eyes fixed on her. “Won't be much left for us to do.”

The men broke into laughter, thrilled at their own humor, and Alistair suddenly flushed, feeling self-conscious, realizing she had left her mantle and furs on the sand and was now wearing just a simple gown.

Determined to get back to her peace, Alistair turned and slowly faced the men, unafraid, staring each in the eye as she stood there, proud, royal, commanding.

“I have left, as you can see, all of my jewels and furs on the sand,” she said, her voice loud and confident, still the voice of a Queen. “That should satisfy you. Take it and go,” she said, ready to be done with them.

The men looked down at the sand, and their eyes lit up at the sight of all her valuables. Yet they kept approaching. She could see they were still not satisfied; they wanted her.

“I think we shall take quite a bit more than that,” one of them, clearly their leader, said, stepping out in front of the others, a man with a scar that ran across one eye, from forehead to nose. He grinned an evil grin, now hardly ten feet away, and fingered the dagger in his belt.

“Come no closer,” she said, facing them fearlessly. Her heart was pounding inside, but she remain calm as she faced them, drawing on her great reserve of strength and dignity. “I do not wish to harm you.”

The men again broke out into laughter, louder than before.

“You speak as if you are a Queen,” one said. “You are a woman alone in a savage forest, with no men, no weapons, and facing men who enjoy killing. How exactly are you going to harm us?”

They were now but several feet away, still approaching the water, and Alistair looked their leader right in the eyes.

“I will not warn you again,” she said. “Come closer, and you will regret it. Take my possessions and be satisfied.”

“Oh, I will be *satisfied*, my lady,” he said, reaching down and drawing his dagger. “Don’t worry yourself over that.”

He took his first step into the water and she knew that in but a few more steps he would reach her.

Alistair closed her eyes and focused, tuning out the world, these men, the sounds of the forest; instead, she searched within, for her true source of power.

Slowly, she felt it rising. She summoned from deep within her an ancient power, one she did not fully understand, yet which had always been with her, lurking at the periphery of her consciousness, coming to her in times of trouble. She had always tried to shut it out. But now she welcomed it, willed it to come back to her.

Alistair felt time begin to slow. She began to feel every fiber of every moment, felt the tremendous power coursing within her, slowly bubbling up. She held her palms out to her sides, and she slowly felt the energy of this pond, the ancient energy of the water, coursing through her, filling her. She turned her palms skyward and raised them, and as she did she felt the energy of the sky, the clouds, the woods all around her. It was filling her to the point of overflowing.

She opened her eyes and saw the clouds above scurrying, racing past, shifting colors, churning in the sky. She heard a great cacophony rise up in the wood, heard the birds chirp louder and louder, a chorus of shrieks so loud she could hardly hear herself think.

The ruffians, hearing it, too, looked about in wonder, peering into the wood. A flock of exotic birds—bright scarlet, with long black tails and claws—gathered on the branches at the edge of the clearing, screeching. Alistair could feel her dominion over them. She could feel the rage within them. She could feel them awaiting her command.

Silently, she commanded them.

Go forth. Unleash your fury.

The flock of birds suddenly launched, aiming right for the men. They flew over Alistair’s head, swooping down from behind, and snatched the daggers from their hands and belts, stripping them of their weapons. Others clawed the men’s faces and eyes and hands, as the men tried helplessly to swat them away.

The ruffians cried out in pain, covered in blood—until finally Alistair had enough. She did not wish to see anyone suffer—not even those who deserved it.

Alistair silently commanded the flock to leave, and instantly they did, screeching, disappearing back into the wood.

The men stood there, dazed, breathless, scratched up, blood on their faces and hands and arms. Alistair expected them to be humbled, to turn and flee.

Yet, instead, they stood their ground and still faced her; instead of humility, she watched their faces harden with rage.

“Whatever you are,” their leader said, seething, “you will pay for that.”

With a shout, he lunged for her.

Alistair could restrain herself no longer. She closed her eyes and slowly pushed her palms forward and as she did, there came a tremendous splashing noise, and out of the pond there leapt

hundreds of fish—small, silver fish, with jagged teeth. They all leapt up high overhead, just as she commanded them, in a perfect arc, their silver scales flashing in the sun. They came down, jaws open, and landed on the men.

Cries of agony cut through the air as the fish landed teeth-first, embedding themselves in the men's necks and cheeks and eyes. The men tried to pull them off, but more and more kept coming, a never-ending stream sailing through the air. They pinned the men down to their backs, writhing—and still more came.

The beach was soon covered with their silver scales, flopping, men no longer visible beneath them. Soon, the men stopped struggling, their cries disappeared, and all was still once again.

Alistair looked out at the havoc before her, and she glanced back at the pond. She thought again of walking in, of ending it all—but now, something within her had shifted. A certain strength had overcome her. She had felt so fragile before, so alone. But now she felt infused with the power of the universe. Now she remembered what she had forgotten in her grief: that she was all-powerful, that she had a purpose in this life—and that she was not ever alone.

These men, she realized, had been a blessing. They had made her realize something. It was not time to die. Dying was the easy way out. And Alistair never took the easy way out.

Instead, it was time to do something much harder:

To live.

*

Alistair walked alone through the bustling city of Savaria, being jostled in every direction, wearing the simple clothes she had left on her back, and she looked about in wonder. It was a small city, an ancient city, well-fortified, guarded by thick stone walls, endless knights stationed on them. Indeed, knights flooded the city, and she could hear the shouts of tournaments, of jousting, though she could not see them from here, the crowds too thick.

In the distance, punctuating the skyline, she noted a castle looming over the city. It was a quaint city, though not a fraction as resplendent as her own royal city, with a castle ten times the size and a hundred times the soldiers, all awaiting her command.

Alistair's stomach growled. She had been told there was work to be found in the castle, honest work that would pay a day's wage. She looked up at it, thinking.

Work, she thought. She, who had been served by a thousand servants, looking for work. The thought was humbling. And yet humility was what she wanted.

Alistair walked toward it, making her way on the muddy path of the city, slipping and sliding, wearing a simple frock which she had traded in as soon as she had entered the city. She marveled that she had traded a royal gown of silk and gold for this—a scratchy frock made of the cheapest canvas. Her single gown had been worth a thousand of these.

But she no longer cared. She wanted to blend in with the common folk, to disappear into anonymity, to find a hole in the wall and stay there. She wanted to punish herself for her father. For the blood she carried within her. All of this humiliation and discomfort—it all made bearable a life she could not bear otherwise.

Excitement buzzed all around her in the chaotic city, but Alistair, downcast, distracted, barely took it in, lost in her own thoughts, in her former life. People bumped her shoulders, chickens ran by her feet, dogs barked, and children ran, brushing against her legs—and she barely noticed any of it. Night was beginning to fall, and Alistair knew that now was not the time to approach the castle. She would wait for morning. For now, she needed to find a place to stay.

Alistair turned down the back alleys, searching for the lowest part of town, a place where she could be completely anonymous, could lose herself in her sorrows. The streets became narrower and

narrower, the facades more crooked, the buildings leaning. The streets stank here, too, old women tossing filth from chamber pots, rats scurrying beneath Alistair's feet.

Alistair passed a series of taverns, drunks lying in the streets; she could hear the bar fights inside, could hear men laughing too loud, their blood ripe with ale.

This will do, she thought.

She stepped over several unconscious bodies, kicked away rats, and weaved her way until she came to the end of a dark alley and found a small building leaning to one side, the poorest of the poor establishments. This would be a place, she knew, where she could lose herself completely. Where no one would ask her name.

The door ajar, Alistair pushed it open gently. It creaked, and an awful smell came out at her from the small, hot, crowded room, stinking of bad breath and stale beer. It was airless, and the dozen or so men in the room turned and stared at her, eyes opening wide at the sight of her. They were all hunched over their mugs, forlorn, lost in their ale. They stared, but seemed too listless to move. One belched.

Alistair's skin crawled being in this place, the sort of place that wouldn't even exist in her kingdom. She felt nauseous even standing here—yet she forced herself to. Her penance, she knew, had to begin somewhere.

A man emerged from the swinging back doors, clearly the innkeep, wearing an apron covered in fish guts. He examined her as he wiped his hands on it, facing her. A tall, beefy man with broad shoulders and a big belly, unshaven, with greasy hair, he wore a dour expression, not an ounce of kindness in his eyes.

He examined her silently, and the room fell quiet, an awkward tension in the air.

"Lost, are you?" he finally asked, his voice rough and cutting.

Alistair stood there, unsure what to say, frozen with terror at the prospect of her new life. But she swallowed and forced herself to stand where she was.

"I need work," she replied evenly. "And a place to stay."

The innkeep's eyebrows raised in surprise as he looked her over again.

"You employ waitresses here, do you not?" she asked, sounding more regal than she wished to.

He glowered.

"If I take you," he replied, "you'll be scrubbing my tables and scrubbing my floors. As far as lodging, there's a room in the attic. More like a closet. Big enough to hold the likes of you. The bed has bugs, but you'll get used to it. They all do. I'll let you stay there—but in return, you'll work for me. The days start at sunup and end when I say they do."

Alistair gulped, envisioning her future. She closed her eyes and pushed back tears. She so badly wanted to turn and run. But she would not allow herself to.

Finally, she opened her eyes and nodded back in agreement.

He took several steps forward and snatched her hands roughly in his. He turned them over and examined them skeptically, as if she were a horse he'd just traded for.

A look of disapproval crossed his face.

"You've never seen a day's work in your life," he said curtly.

He stood there, frowning, and she could see him debating.

She stared back evenly, resolute, and he looked at her for a long time. Finally, he must have seen something in her eyes, perhaps her steely determination.

He nodded.

"Go upstairs," he said, "and unpack your things. The night shift starts soon."

Alistair sat in her new room on the edge of her too-soft bed, ducking beneath the low, sloped ceiling—and she wept. She could not help herself. She had been holding it all in and now, finally, it all came gushing out. All of her pent-up emotion, all her exhaustion from the trip, from the ordeal of her new life, of being in this place.... She wept and wept, and did not think she'd ever stop.

Alistair had never seen such a lowly place in her life: the worn floors were warped, the walls stank of mold, and the room was not large enough to stand in. There was room to lie down on the flea-infested mattress, or kneel by the tiny window, the room's one saving grace. It was covered in grime, and not more than twelve inches high, but it was enough to let in a sliver of light, and a sliver of a view of the city. There was no desk in this room, no quill, no parchment, no place for Alistair to do her reading or writing. Then again, she realized, those who stayed in this room probably had little desire, or time, for either.

This, she had to remind herself, was what she wanted, what she chose. She felt sure that no one would ever find her here. She could disappear into a life of anonymity, of service, of remorse.

Alistair made the best of it, kneeling before the window, the floorboards creaking, and using its sill. She took out the one possession she had been unable to part with—*The History of the MacGil Kings*—and laid it out before her. A precious leather-bound volume gilded with gold, its pages well-worn with use, Alistair had had this volume ever since she was a child. The pages, filled with illustrations, crinkled as she turned them.

It was easy for Alistair to become lost as she read the ancient high language, reserved for Kings and Queens, which she read fluently. She could even write in it if she chose, one of the few people in the kingdoms who could do so. Her tutors, she remembered, had been amazed. In fact, by the time she was ten, there was nothing left that they could teach her.

Alistair scanned the pages and allowed herself to get lost. There were histories, memories, fables she'd read as a child. There were chronicles, stories of all the MacGil Kings, of all seven generations. She knew them all by heart.

She was determined to read it all through again, especially the story of her father, back in the time when he was a good and wise and fair King, before he'd become who he was. She was determined to read about the time her father met her mother, about when she was born, when her brother was born, to try to understand where and how her father had become who he'd become.

She wanted to go back and read about other MacGil Kings, in other times, in other lands, before the Great Divide, before the Canyon, before the Shield. Before the Second Ring. Back when the Ring and the Empire were one.

But for the first time ever, Alistair could not bring herself to read. Her eyes filled with tears, so much so that she could no longer see, her vision cloudy. She gingerly closed the book.

Another time, she vowed to herself.

Alistair set it down, and instead she looked out the window. She saw the rooftops of all the low, crooked, dingy buildings, saw people laughing and stumbling in the muddy streets; beyond them, she saw knights jousting in tournaments, saw a city bustling, alive.

And beyond the walls, stretching to the horizon, she saw the lush, green countryside of the Ring. Her heart ached as she looked to the skyline. She knew that out there, somewhere, was at least one person who understood. One person who shared her fate. One person as powerful as she.

Out there, somewhere, was the one person she had left in the world: her brother.

Thorgrin, she thought, wiping away her tears. *Where are you?*

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A QUEST OF HEROES
(Book #1 in the Sorcerer's Ring)



“THE SORCERER’S RING has all the ingredients for an instant success: plots, counterplots, mystery, valiant knights, and blossoming relationships replete with broken hearts, deception and betrayal. It will keep you entertained for hours, and will satisfy all ages. Recommended for the permanent library of all fantasy readers.”

--*Books and Movie Reviews*, Roberto Mattos

The #1 Bestseller, with over 500 five star reviews on Amazon!

From #1 Bestselling author Morgan Rice comes the debut of a dazzling new fantasy series. A QUEST OF HEROES (BOOK #1 IN THE SORCERER’S RING) revolves around the epic coming of age story of one special boy, a 14 year old from a small village on the outskirts of the Kingdom of the Ring. The youngest of four, the least favorite of his father, hated by his brothers, Thorgrin senses he is different from the others. He dreams of becoming a great warrior, of joining the King’s men and protecting the Ring from the hordes of creatures on the other side of the Canyon. When he comes of age and is forbidden by his father to try out for the King’s Legion, he refuses to take no for an answer: he journeys out on his own, determined to force his way into King’s Court and be taken seriously.

But King’s Court is rife with its own family dramas, power struggles, ambitions, jealousy, violence and betrayal. King MacGil must choose an heir from amongst his children, and the ancient Dynasty Sword, the source of all their power, still sits untouched, waiting for the chosen one to arrive. Thorgrin arrives as an outsider and battles to be accepted, and to join the King’s Legion.

Thorgrin comes to learn he has mysterious powers he does not understand, that he has a special gift, and a special destiny. Against all odds he falls in love with the king’s daughter, and as their forbidden relationship blossoms, he discovers he has powerful rivals. As he struggles to make sense of his powers, the king’s sorcerer takes him under his wing and tells him of a mother he never knew, in a land far away, beyond the Canyon, beyond even the land of the Dragons.

Before Thorgrin can venture out and become the warrior he yearns to be, he must complete his training. But this may be cut short, as he finds himself propelled into the center of royal plots and counterplots, ones that may threaten his love and bring him down—and the entire kingdom with him.

With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A QUEST OF HEROES is an epic tale of friends and lovers, of rivals and suitors, of knights and dragons, of intrigues and political machinations, of coming of age, of broken hearts, of deception, ambition and betrayal. It is a tale of honor and courage, of

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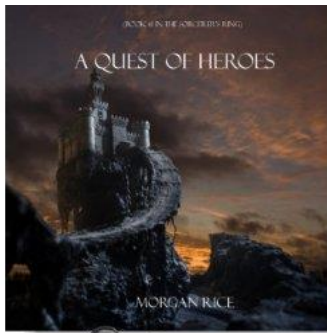
“A spirited fantasy that weaves elements of mystery and intrigue into its story line. A Quest of Heroes is all about the making of courage and about realizing a life purpose that leads to growth, maturity, and excellence....For those seeking meaty fantasy adventures, the protagonists, devices, and action provide a vigorous set of encounters that focus well on Thor's evolution from a dreamy child to a young adult facing impossible odds for survival....Only the beginning of what promises to be an epic young adult series.”

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[A QUEST OF HEROES](#)
(Book #1 in the Sorcerer's Ring)



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About 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 twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising three books; of the epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books; and of the new epic fantasy series OF CROWNS AND GLORY. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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