

A fantastical landscape featuring a large, bright sun low on the horizon, casting a golden glow. The sky is filled with several large, reddish-orange moons of varying sizes. In the foreground, a body of water reflects the sun and moons. On the right, a castle with tall, spires sits on a rocky cliff overlooking the water. The overall color palette is dominated by warm, fiery tones of orange, red, and gold.

MORGAN RICE

BOOK #12 IN THE SORCERER'S RING

A
LAND
OF
FIRE

A LAND OF FIRE

(Book #12 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 ten books (and counting), which has been translated into six languages.

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 twelve books and counting.

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

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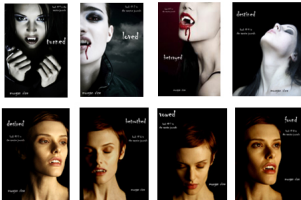
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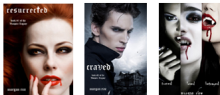
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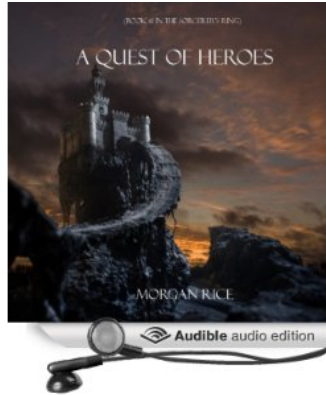


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CONTENTS

[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](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE](#)

“Thus I turn my back:
There is a world elsewhere.”

--William Shakespeare
Coriolanus

CHAPTER ONE

Gwendolyn stood on the shore of the Upper Isles, gazing out into the ocean, watching with horror as the fog rolled in and began to consume her baby. She felt as if her heart were breaking in two as she saw Guwayne floating farther and farther away, into the horizon, disappearing in the mist. The tide was carrying him God knows where, every second taking him more beyond her reach.

Tears rolled down Gwendolyn's cheeks as she watched, unable to tear herself away, numb to the world. She lost all sense of time and place, could no longer feel her body. A part of her died as she watched the person she loved most in the world be consumed by an ocean tide. It was as if a part of her were sucked out to sea with him.

Gwen hated herself for what she had done; yet at the same time, she knew it was the only thing in the world that might just save her child. Gwen heard the roaring and thundering on the horizon behind her, and she knew that soon, this entire island would be consumed with flame—and that nothing in the world could save them. Not Argon, who lay still in a helpless state; not Thorgrin, who was a world away, in the Land of the Druids; not Alistair or Erec, who were another world away, in the Southern Isles; and not Kendrick or the Silver or any of the other brave men who were here in this place, none of them with the means to combat a dragon. Magic was what they needed—and it was the one thing they had run out of.

They had been lucky to escape the Ring at all, and now, she knew, fate had caught up with them. There was no more running, no more hiding. It was time to face the death that had been chasing them.

Gwendolyn turned and faced the opposite horizon, and she could see even from here the black mass of dragons heading her way. She had little time; she did not want to die all alone here on these shores, but with her people, protecting them as best she could.

Gwen turned back for one last look out at the ocean, hoping for a last glimpse of Guwayne.

But there was nothing. Guwayne was far from her now, somewhere on the horizon, already traveling to a world she would never know.

Please, God, Gwen prayed. Be with him. Take my life for his. I will do anything. Keep Guwayne safe. Let me hold him again. I beg you. Please.

Gwendolyn opened her eyes, hoping to see a sign, perhaps a rainbow in the sky—anything.

But the horizon was empty. There was nothing but black, glowering clouds, as if the universe were furious with her for what she had done.

Sobbing, Gwen turned her back on the ocean, on what remained of her life, and broke into a jog, each step taking her closer to make her final stand with her people.

*

Gwen stood on the upper parapets of Tirus's fort, surrounded by dozens of her people, among them her brothers Kendrick and Reece and Godfrey, her cousins Matus and Stara, Steffen, Aberthol, Srog, Brandt, Atme, and all the Legion. They all faced the sky, silent and somber, knowing what was coming for them.

As they listened to the distant roars that shook the earth, they stood there, helpless, watching Ralibar wage their war for them, a single brave dragon fighting his best, holding off the host of enemy dragons. Gwen's heart soared as she watched Ralibar fight, so brave, so bold, one dragon against dozens and yet unafraid. Ralibar breathed fire on the dragons, raised his great talons and scratched them, clutched them, and sank his teeth into their throats. He

was not only stronger than the others, but faster, too. He was a thing to watch.

As Gwen watched, her heart soared with its last ounce of hope; a part of her dared to believe that maybe Ralibar could defeat them. She saw Ralibar duck and dive down as three dragons breathed fire at his face, narrowly missing him. Ralibar then lunged forward and plunged his talons into one of the dragons' chest, and used his momentum to force it down toward the ocean.

Several dragons breathed fire onto Ralibar's back as he dove, and Gwen watched in horror as Ralibar and the other dragon became a flaming ball, dropping down to the sea. The dragon resisted, but Ralibar used all his weight to drive it down into the waves—and soon they both plunged into the ocean.

A great hissing noise arose, along with clouds of steam, as the water doused the fire. Gwen watched with anticipation, hoping he was okay—and moments later, Ralibar surfaced, alone. The other dragon surfaced too, but it was bobbing, floating on the waves, dead.

Without hesitating, Ralibar shot up toward the dozens of other dragons diving down at him. As they came down, their great jaws open, aiming for him, Ralibar was on the attack: he reached out his great talons, leaned back, spread his wings, and grabbed two of them, then spun around and drove them down into the sea.

Ralibar held them under, yet as he did, a dozen dragons pounced on Ralibar's exposed back. The whole group of them plummeted into the ocean, driving Ralibar down with them. Ralibar, as valiantly as he fought, was just way too outnumbered, and he plunged into the water, flailing, held down by dozens of dragons, screeching in fury.

Gwen swallowed, her heart breaking at the sight of Ralibar fighting for all of them, all alone out there; she wished more than anything that she could help him. She

combed the surface of the ocean, waiting, hoping, for any sign of Ralibar, willing him to surface.

But to her horror, he never did.

The other dragons surfaced, and they all flew up, regrouped, and set their sights on the Upper Isles. They seemed to look right at Gwendolyn as they let out a great roar and spread their wings.

Gwen felt her heart splitting. Her dear friend Ralibar, their last hope, their last line of defense, was dead.

Gwen turned to her men, who stood staring in shock. They knew what was coming next: an unstoppable wave of destruction.

Gwen felt heavy; she opened her mouth, and the words stuck in her throat.

“Sound the bells,” she finally said, her voice hoarse. “Command our people to shelter. Anyone above ground needs to go below, now. Into the caves, the cellars—anywhere but here. Command them—now!”

“Sound the bells!” Steffen yelled, running to the edge of the fort, screaming out over the courtyard. Soon, bells tolled throughout the square. Hundreds of her people, survivors from the Ring, now fled, racing to take shelter, heading for the caves on the outskirts of town or hurrying into cellars and shelters below ground, preparing themselves against the inevitable wave of fire that would come.

“My Queen,” Srog said, turning to her, “perhaps we can all take shelter in this fort. After all, it is made of stone.”

Gwen shook her head knowingly.

“You do not understand the dragons’ wrath,” she said. “Nothing above ground will be safe. Nothing.”

“But my lady, perhaps we will be safer in this fort,” he urged. “It has stood the test of time. These stone walls are a foot thick. Wouldn’t you rather be here than underneath the earth?”

Gwen shook her head. There came a roar, and she looked to the horizon and could see the dragons approaching. Her heart broke as she saw, in the distance, the dragons breathing a wall of flame down onto her fleet that lay in the southern harbor. She watched as her precious ships, her lifeline off this island, beautiful ships that had taken decades to build, were reduced to nothing but kindling. She felt fortunate that she had anticipated this, and had hidden a few ships on the other side of the island. If they ever even survived to use them.

“There is no time for debate. All of us will leave this place at once. Follow me.”

They followed Gwen as she hurried off the roof and down the spiral steps, taking them as fast as she could; as she went, Gwen instinctively reached out to clutch Guwayne—then her heart broke once again as she realized he was gone. She felt a part of her missing as she ran down the steps, hearing all the footsteps behind her, taking them two at a time, all of them rushing to get to safety. Gwen could hear the distant roars of the dragons getting closer, shaking the place already, and she only prayed that Guwayne was safe.

Gwen burst out of the castle and raced across the courtyard with the others, all of them running for the entrance to the dungeons, long emptied of prisoners. Several of her soldiers waited before the steel doors, opening up to steps leading down to the ground, and before they entered, Gwen stopped and turned to her people.

She saw several people still rushing about the courtyard, shrieking in fear, in a daze, unsure where to go.

“Come here!” she called out. “Come underground! All of you!”

Gwen stepped aside, making sure they all made it to safety first, and one by one, her people rushed past her, down the stone steps into the darkness.

The last people to stop and stand with her were her brothers, Kendrick and Reece and Godfrey, along with Steffen. The five of them turned and examined the sky together, as another earth-shattering roar came.

The host of dragons was now so close that Gwen could see them, hardly several hundred yards away, their great wings larger than life, all of them emboldened, faces filled with fury. Their great jaws were wide open, as if anticipating tearing them apart, and their teeth were each as large as Gwendolyn.

So, Gwendolyn thought, this is what death looks like.

Gwen took one last look around, and she saw hundreds of her people taking shelter in their new homes above ground, refusing to go below.

“I told them to get below ground!” Gwen yelled.

“Some of our people listened,” Kendrick observed sadly, shaking his head, “but many would not.”

Gwen felt herself breaking up inside. She knew what would happen to the people who stayed above ground. Why did her people always have to be so obstinate?

And then it happened—the first of the dragon fire came rolling toward them, far enough away so as not to burn them, yet close enough that Gwen could feel the heat scorching her face. She watched in horror as screams arose, coming from her people on the far side of the courtyard who had decided to wait above ground, inside their dwellings or inside Tirus’s fort. The stone fort, so indomitable just moments before, was now ablaze, flames shooting out the sides and front and back, as if it were nothing but a house of flame, its stone charred and seared in but a moment. Gwen swallowed hard, knowing that if they had tried to wait it out in the fort, they would all be dead.

Others had not been so lucky: they shrieked, ablaze, and ran through the streets before collapsing to the earth. The horrible smell of burning flesh cut through the air.

“My lady,” Steffen said, “we must go below. Now!”

Gwen could not bear to tear herself away, and yet she knew he was right. She allowed herself to be led by the others, to be dragged down through the gates, down the steps, into the blackness, as a wave of flame came rolling toward her. The steel doors slammed closed a second before they reached her, and as she heard them reverberate behind her, they felt like a door slamming closed in her heart.

CHAPTER TWO

Alistair, sobbing, knelt beside Erec's body, clutching him tight, her wedding dress covered in his blood. As she held him, her entire world spinning, she felt the life flow beginning to ebb out of him. Erec, riddled with stab wounds, was moaning, and she could sense by the rhythms of his pulse that he was dying.

"NO!" Alistair moaned, cradling him in her arms, rocking him. She felt her heart rend in two as she held him, felt as if she were dying herself. This man whom she had been about to marry, who had looked at her with such love just moments before, now lay nearly lifeless in her arms; she could hardly process it. He had received the blow so unsuspecting, so filled with love and joy; he had been caught off guard because of her. Because of her stupid game, asking him to close his eyes while she approached with her dress. Alistair felt overwhelmed with guilt, as if it were all her fault.

"Alistair," he moaned.

She looked down and saw his eyes half open, saw them becoming dull, the life force beginning to leave them.

"Know that this is not your fault," he whispered. "And know how much I love you."

Alistair wept, holding him to her chest, feeling him growing cold. As she did, something inside her snapped, something that felt the injustice of it all, something that absolutely refused to allow him to die.

Alistair suddenly felt a familiar, tingly feeling, like a thousand pinpricks in the tips of her fingers, and she felt her entire body flush with heat from head to toe. A strange force overtook her, something strong and primal, something she did not understand; it came on stronger

than any surge of force she had ever felt in her life, like an outside spirit taking over her body. She felt her hands and arms burning hot, and she reflexively reached out and placed her palms on Erec's chest and forehead.

Alistair held them there, her hands burning ever hotter, and she closed her eyes. Images flashed through her mind. She saw Erec as a youth, leaving the Southern Isles, so proud and noble, standing on a tall ship; she saw him entering the Legion; joining the Silver; jousting, becoming a champion, defeating enemies, defending the Ring. She saw him sitting erect, posture perfect on his horse, in shining silver, a model of nobility and courage. She knew she could not let him die; the world could not afford to let him die.

Alistair's hands grew hotter still, and she opened her eyes and saw his eyes closing. She also saw a white light emanating from her palms, spreading all over Erec; she saw him infused with it, surrounded by a globe. And as she watched, she saw his wounds, seeping blood, slowly begin to seal up.

Erec's eyes flashed open, filled with light, and she felt something shift within him. His body, so cold just moments before, began to warm. She felt his life force returning.

Erec looked up at her in surprise and wonder, and as he did, Alistair felt her own energy depleted, her own life force lessening, as she transferred her energy to him.

His eyes closed and he fell into a deep sleep. Her hands suddenly grew cool, and she checked his pulse, felt it return to normal.

She sighed with great relief, knowing she had brought him back. Her palms shook, so drained from the experience, and she felt depleted, yet elated.

Thank you, God, she thought, as she leaned down, laid her face on his chest, and hugged him with tears of joy.
Thank you for not taking my husband from me.

Alistair stopped crying, and she looked over and took in the scene: she saw Bowyer's sword lying there on the stone, its hilt and blade covered in blood. She hated Bowyer with a passion more than she could conceive; she was determined to avenge Erec.

Alistair reached down and picked up the bloody sword; her palms were covered in blood as she held it up, examining it. She prepared to cast it away, to watch it go clattering to the far end of the room—when suddenly, the door to the room burst open.

Alistair turned, the bloody sword in hand, to see Erec's family rush into the room, flanked by a dozen soldiers. As they came closer, their expressions of alarm turned to one of horror, as they all looked from her to the unconscious Erec.

"What have you done?" Dauphine cried out.

Alistair looked back at her, uncomprehending.

"I?" she asked. "I have done nothing."

Dauphine glowered as she stormed closer.

"Have you?" she said. "You've only killed our best and greatest knight!"

Alistair stared back at her in horror as she suddenly realized they were all looking at her as if she were a murderer.

She looked down and saw the bloody sword in her hand, saw the bloodstains on her palm and all over her dress, and she realized they all thought she had done it.

"But I did not stab him!" Alistair protested.

"No?" Dauphine accused. "Then did the sword appear magically in your hand?"

Alistair looked about the room, as they all gathered around her.

"It was a man who did this. The man who challenged him on the field in battle: Bowyer."

The others looked to each other, skeptical.

“Oh was it, then?” Dauphine countered. “And where is this man?” she asked, looking all about the room.

Alistair saw no sign of him, and she realized they all thought she was lying.

“He fled,” she said. “After he stabbed him.”

“And then how did his bloody sword get into your hand?” Dauphine countered.

Alistair looked down at the sword in her hand in horror, and she flung it, clanging across the stone.

“But why would I kill my own husband-to-be?” she asked.

“You are a sorcerer,” Dauphine said, standing over her now. “Your kind are not to be trusted. Oh, my brother!” Dauphine said, rushing forward, dropping down to her knees beside Erec, getting between him and Alistair. Dauphine hugged Erec, clutching him.

“What have you done?” Dauphine moaned, between tears.

“But I am innocent!” Alistair exclaimed.

Dauphine turned to her with an expression of hatred, and then turned to all the soldiers.

“Arrest her!” she commanded.

Alistair felt hands grabbing her from behind, as she was yanked to her feet. Her energy was depleted, and she was unable to resist as the guards bound her wrists behind her back and began to drag her away. She cared little for what happened to her—yet, as they dragged her away, she could not bear the thought of being apart from Erec. Not now, not when he needed her most. The healing she had given him was only temporary; she knew that he needed another session, and that if he did not get it, he would die.

“NO!” she yelled. “Let me go!”

But her shouts fell on deaf ears as they dragged her away, shackled, as if she were just another common prisoner.

CHAPTER THREE

Thor raised his hands to his eyes, blinded by the light, as the shining, golden doors to his mother's castle opened wide, so intense he could barely see. A figure walked out toward him, a silhouette, a woman he sensed, in every fiber of his being, to be his mother. Thor's heart pounded as he saw her standing there, arms at her side, facing him.

Slowly, the light began to fade, just enough for him to lower his hands and look at her. It was the moment he had been waiting for his entire life, the moment that had haunted him in his dreams. He could not believe it: it was really her. His mother. Inside this castle, perched atop this cliff. Thor opened his eyes fully and laid eyes upon her for the first time, standing but a few feet away, staring back. For the first time, he saw her face.

Thor's breath caught in his throat as he looked back at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She looked timeless, at once both old and young, her skin nearly translucent, her face shining. She smiled back at him sweetly, her long blonde hair falling down past her stomach, her big bright translucent gray eyes, her perfectly chiseled cheekbone and jawline matching his. What surprised Thor most as he stared at her was that he could recognize many of his own features in her face—the curve of her jaw, her lips, the shade of her gray eyes, even her proud forehead. In some ways, it was like staring back at himself. She also looked strikingly like Alistair.

Thor's mother, dressed in a white silk robe and cloak, the hood pulled back, stood with her palms out to her sides, adorned with no jewelry, her palms smooth, her skin like that of a baby's. Thor could feel the intense energy exuding from her, more intense than he had ever felt, like the sun,

enveloping him. As he stood basking in it, he felt waves of love directed toward him. He had never before felt such unconditional love and acceptance. He felt like he *belonged*.

Standing here now, before her, Thor finally felt as if a part of him were complete, as if all was okay in the world.

“Thorgrin, my son,” she said.

It was the most beautiful voice he’d ever heard, soft, reverberating off the ancient stone walls of the castle, sounding as if it had come down from heaven itself. Thor stood there in shock, not knowing what to do or what to say. Was this all real? He wondered briefly if it was all just another creation in the Land of the Druids, just another dream, or his mind playing tricks on him. He had been wanting to embrace his mother for as long as he could remember, and he took a step forward, determined to know if she was an apparition.

Thor reached out to embrace her, and as he did, he was afraid that his hug would go through nothing but air, all of this just an illusion. But as Thor reached out, he felt his arms wrap around her, felt himself hug a real person—and he felt her hug him back. It was the most amazing feeling in the world.

She hugged him tight, and Thor was elated to know that she was real. That this was all real. That he had a mother, that she really existed, that she was here in the flesh, in this land of illusion and fantasy—and that she really cared about him.

After a long while, they leaned back, and Thor looked at her, tears in his eyes, and saw that there were tears in hers, too.

“I’m so proud of you, my son,” she said.

He stared back, at a loss for words.

“You have completed your journey,” she added. “You are worthy to be here. You have become the man I always knew you would.”