

A vertical book cover illustration. The scene is a fantastical sunset or sunrise over a body of water. The sky is filled with a large, bright sun in the center, and several moons of varying sizes and phases are scattered across the sky. The colors are dominated by warm oranges, reds, and yellows. In the distance, the silhouette of a castle or a large building is visible on the right side, with its reflection in the water. The overall mood is dramatic and otherworldly.

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](http://www.morganricebooks.com) to stay in touch.

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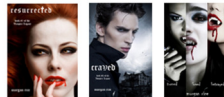
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“Thus I turn my back:  
There is a world elsewhere.”

--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.

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