

A FEAST OF DRAGONS

(BOOK #3 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 eight books, which has been translated into six languages.

Morgan is also author of the #1 Bestselling THE VAMPIRE LEGACY, a young adult series comprising two books and counting.

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 three 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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“Come not between the dragon and his wrath.”

—William Shakespeare
King Lear

CHAPTER ONE

King McCloud charged down the slope, racing across the Highlands, into the MacGil's side of the Ring, hundreds of his men behind him, hanging on for dear life as his horse galloped down the mountain. He reached back, raised his whip, and brought it down hard on the horse's hide: his horse didn't need prodding, but he liked to whip it anyway. He enjoyed inflicting pain on animals.

McCloud nearly salivated as he took in the sight before him: an idyllic MacGil village, its men out in the fields, unarmed, its women home, tending linens on strings, barely dressed in the summer clime. House doors were open; chickens roamed freely; cauldrons already boiling with dinner. He thought of the damage he would do, the loot he would garner, the women he would ruin—and his smile broadened. He could almost taste the blood he was about to shed.

They charged and charged, their horses rumbling like thunder, spilling over the countryside, and finally, someone took notice: it was the village guard, a pathetic excuse for a soldier, a teenage boy, holding a spear, who stood and turned at the sound of their approach. McCloud got a good look at the white of his eyes, saw the fear and panic in his face; in this sleepy outpost, this boy had probably never seen battle in his life. He was woefully unprepared.

McCloud wasted no time: he wanted the first kill, as he always had in battle. His men knew enough to give it to him. He wanted it so bad he could taste it.

McCloud whipped his horse again, until it shrieked, and gained speed, heading out farther in front of the others. He raised his ancestor's spear, a heavy thing of iron, leaned back, and hurled it.

As always, his aim was true: the boy had barely finished turning when the spear met his back, sailing right through it and pinning him to a tree with a whooshing noise. Blood gushed from his back, and it was enough to make McCloud's day.

McCloud let out a short cry of joy as they all continued charging, across the choice land of the MacGils, through yellow cornstalks swaying in the wind, up to his horse's thighs, and towards the village gate. It was almost too beautiful a day, too beautiful a picture, for the devastation that they were about to enact.

They charged through the unprotected gate of the village, this place dumb enough to be situated on the outskirts of the Ring, so close to the Highlands. They should have known better, McCloud thought with scorn, as he swung an axe and chopped down the wooden sign announcing the place. He would rename it soon enough.

His men entered the place, and all around him screams erupted of women, of children, of old men, of whomever happened to be home in this godforsaken place. There were probably a hundred unlucky souls, and McCloud was determined to make each one of them pay. He raised his axe high overhead as he focused on one woman in particular, running with her back to him, trying for dear life to make it back to the safety of her home. It was not meant to be.

McCloud's axe hit her in the back of her calf, as he had wanted, and she went down with a shriek. He hadn't wanted to kill her: only to maim her. After all, he wanted her alive for the pleasure he would have with her afterwards. He had chosen her well: a woman with long, untamed blond hair and narrow hips, hardly over eighteen. She would be his. And when he was done with her, perhaps he would kill her then. Or perhaps not; perhaps he would keep her as his slave.

He screamed in delight as he rode up next to her and jumped off his horse in mid-stride, landing on top of her and tackling her to the ground. He rolled with her on the dirt, feeling the impact of the road, and smiled as he relished what it felt like to be alive.

Finally, life had meaning again.

CHAPTER TWO

Kendrick stood in the eye of the storm, in the Hall of Arms, flanked by dozens of his brothers, all hardened members of the Silver, and looked calmly back at Darloc, the commander of the royal guard sent on an unfortunate mission. What had Darloc been thinking? Did he really think he could march into the Hall of Arms and try to arrest Kendrick, the most loved of the royal family, in front of all his brothers in arms? Did he really think the others would stand by and allow it?

He had vastly underestimated The Silver's loyalty to Kendrick. Even if Darloc had arrived with legitimate charges for his arrest—and these certainly were not—Kendrick doubted very much that his brothers would allow him to be carted away. They were loyal for life, and loyal to the death. That was the creed of The Silver. He would have reacted the same way if any of his brethren were threatened. After all, they had all trained together, fought together, for all their lives.

Kendrick could feel the tension that hung in the thick silence, as The Silver held their weapons drawn at the mere dozen royal guards, who shifted where they stood, looking more uncomfortable by the moment. They must have known it would be a massacre if any of them tried for their swords—and wisely, none did. They all stood there and awaited the order of their commander, Darloc.

Darloc swallowed, looking very nervous. He realized his cause was hopeless.

“It seems you have not come with enough men,” Kendrick responded calmly, smiling. “A dozen of the King's Guard against a hundred of The Silver. Yours is a lost cause.”

Darloc flushed, looking very pale. He cleared his throat.

“My liege, we all serve the same kingdom. I do not wish to fight you. You are correct: this is a fight we could not win. If you command us, we will leave this place and return to the King.

But you know that Gareth would just send more men for you. Different men. And you know where this will all lead. You might kill them all—but do you really want the blood of your fellow brothers on your hands? Do you really want to spark a civil war? For you, your men would risk their lives, kill anyone. But is that fair to them?”

Kendrick stared back, thinking it all through. Darloc had a point. He did not want any of his men hurt solely on his account. He felt an overwhelming desire to protect them from any bloodshed, no matter what that meant for him. And however awful his brother Gareth was, and however bad a ruler, he did not want a civil war—at least, not on his account. There were other ways; direct confrontation, he had learned, was most often the least effective.

Kendrick reached over and slowly lowered his friend Atme’s sword. He turned and faced the other Silver. He was overwhelmed with gratitude to them for coming to his defense.

“My fellow Silver,” he announced. “I am humbled by your defense, and I assure you it is not in vain. As you all know me, I had nothing to do with the death of my father, our former king. And when I find his true killer, whom I suspect I have already found from the nature of these orders, I shall be the first to have vengeance. I stand falsely accused. That said, I do not wish to be the impetus for a civil war. So please, lower your arms. I will allow them to take me peacefully. For one member of the Ring should never fight another. If justice lives, then the truth will come out—and I will be returned to you promptly.”

The group of Silver slowly, reluctantly, lowered their arms as Kendrick turned back to Darloc. Kendrick stepped forward and walked with Darloc for the door, the King’s Guard surrounding him. Kendrick walked proudly, in the center, erect. Darloc did not try to shackle him—perhaps out of respect, or out of fear, or because Darloc knew he was innocent. Kendrick would lead himself to his

new prison. But he would not give in so easily. Somehow he would clear his name, get himself freed from the dungeon—and kill his father's murderer. Even if it was his own brother.

CHAPTER THREE

Gwendolyn stood in the bowels of the castle, her brother Godfrey beside her, and stared back at Steffen as he stood there, shifting, twisting his hands. He was an odd character—not just because he was deformed, his back twisted and hunched, but also because he seemed to be filled with a nervous energy. His eyes never stopped shifting, and his hands clasped each other as if he were wracked with guilt. He rocked in place as he stood, shifting from foot to foot, and hummed to himself in a deep voice. All these years of being down here, Gwen figured, all these years of isolation had clearly forged him into an odd character.

Gwen waited in anticipation for him to finally open up, to reveal what had happened to her father. But as seconds turned into minutes, as the sweat increased on Steffen's brow, as he rocked ever more dramatically, nothing came. There continued to be just a thick, heavy silence, punctuated only by his humming noises.

Gwen was beginning to sweat herself down here, the roaring fires from the pits too close on this summer day. She wanted to be finished with this, to leave this place—and never return here again. She scrutinized Steffen, trying to decipher his expression, to figure out what ran through his mind. He had promised to tell them something, but now he had fallen silent. As she examined him, it appeared he was having second thoughts. Clearly, he was afraid; he had something to hide.

Finally, Steffen cleared his throat.

“Something fell down the chute that night, I admit it,” he began, not making eye contact, looking somewhere on the floor, “but I’m not sure what it was. It was metal. We took the chamber pot out that night, and I heard something land in the river. Something different. So,” he said,

clearing his throat several times as he wrung his hands, “you see, whatever it is, it washed away, in the tides.”

“Are you certain?” Godfrey demanded.

Steffen nodded vigorously.

Gwen and Godfrey exchanged a look.

“Did you get a look at it, at least?” Godfrey pressed.

Steffen shook his head.

“But you made mention of a dagger. How did you know it was a dagger if you did not see it?”

Gwen asked. She felt certain that he was lying; she just did not know why.

Steffen cleared his throat.

“I said so because I just assumed it was a dagger,” he responded. “It was small and metal. What else could it be?”

“But did you check the bottom of the pot?” Godfrey asked. “After you dumped it? Maybe it is still in the pot, at the bottom.”

Steffen shook his head.

“I checked the bottom,” he said. “I always do. There was nothing. Empty. Whatever it was, it was washed away. I saw it float away.”

“If it was metal, how did it float?” Gwen asked.

Steffen cleared his throat, then shrugged.

“The river is mysterious,” he answered. “Tides are strong.”

Gwen exchanged a skeptical look with Godfrey, and she could tell from his expression that he did not believe Steffen, either.

Gwen was growing increasingly impatient. Now, she was also baffled. It had seemed just moments before that Steffen was going to tell them everything, as he had promised. But it seemed as if he had suddenly changed his mind.

Gwen took a step closer to him and scowled, sensing that this man had something to hide. She put on her toughest face, and as she did, she felt the strength of her father pouring through her. She was determined to discover whatever it was he knew—especially if it would help her find her father’s killer.

“You are lying,” she said, her voice steely cold, the strength in it surprising even her. “Do you know what the punishment is for lying to a member of the royal family?”

Steffen wrung his hands and nearly bounced in place, glancing up at her for a moment, then quickly looking away.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry. Please, I have nothing more.”

“You asked us before if you would be spared from jail if you told us what you knew,” she said. “But you have told us nothing. Why would you ask that question if you had nothing to tell us?”

Steffen licked his lips, looking down at the floor.

“I... I...um,” he started and stopped. He cleared his throat. “I was worried...that I would get in trouble for not reporting that an object came down the chute. That is all. I am sorry. I do not know what it was. It’s gone.”

Gwen narrowed her eyes, staring at him, trying to get to the bottom of this strange character.

“What happened to your master, exactly?” she asked, not letting him off the hook. “We are told he went missing. And that you had something to do with it.”

Steffen shook his head again and again.

“He left,” Steffen answered. “That is all I know. I’m sorry. I know nothing that can help you.”

Suddenly there came a loud swooshing noise from across the room, and they all turned to see waste come flying down the chute, and land with a splat in the huge chamber pot. Steffen turned and ran across the room, hurrying over to the pot. He stood beside it, watching as it filled with waste from the upper chambers.

Gwen turned and looked at Godfrey, who stared back at her. He wore an equally baffled expression.

“Whatever he’s hiding,” she said, “he won’t give it up.”

“We could have him imprisoned,” Godfrey said. “That might get him to speak.”

Gwen shook her head.

“I don’t think so. Not with this one. He’s obviously extremely afraid. I think it has to do with his master. He’s clearly torn about something, and I don’t think it has to do with father’s death. I think he knows something that might help us—but I sense that cornering him will only make him shut down.”

“So what should we do?” Godfrey asked.

Gwen stood there, thinking. She remembered a friend of hers, when she was young, who had once been caught lying. She remembered her parents had pressured her every which way to tell the truth, but she would not. It was only weeks later, when everyone had finally left her alone, that she had stepped forward voluntarily and revealed everything. Gwen sensed the same energy coming off of Steffen, that backing him into a corner would make him shut down, that he needed space to come forward on his own.

“Let’s give him time,” she said. “Let’s search elsewhere. Let’s see what we can find out, and circle back to him when we have more. I think he’ll open up. He’s just not ready.”

Gwen turned and watched him, across the room, examining the waste as it filled the cauldron. She felt certain that he would lead them to her father's murderer. She just did not know how. She wondered what secrets lurked in the depths of his mind.

He was a very strange character, Gwen thought. Very strange, indeed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Thor tried to breathe as he blinked back the water which covered his eyes, his nose, his mouth, pouring down all around him. After sliding across the boat, he had finally managed to grab hold of the wooden railing, and he clung to it for dear life as the relentless water worked away at his grip. Every muscle in his body was shaking, and he did not know how much longer he could hold on.

All around him his brothers did the same, clinging to dear life for whatever they could find as the water tried to drive them off the boat. Somehow, they held on.

The sound was deafening, and it was hard to see more than a few feet in front of him. Despite the summer day the rain was cold, and the water sent a chill through his body he could not shake. Kolk stood there, scowling, hands on his hips as if impervious to the rain wall, and barked out all around him.

“GET BACK TO YOUR SEATS!” he screamed. “ROW!”

Kolk himself took a seat and began rowing, and within moments the boys slipped and crawled across the deck, heading back for the benches. Thor’s heart pounded as he let go himself, and struggled to cross the deck. Krohn, inside his shirt, whined, as Thor slipped then fell, landing hard on the deck.

He crawled the rest of the way, and soon found himself back in his seat.

“TIE YOURSELF IN!” Kolk screamed.

Thor looked down and saw the knotty ropes beneath his bench, and finally realized what they were for: he reached down and tied one around his wrist, chaining himself to the bench and the oar.

It worked. He stopped slipping. And soon, he was able to row.

All around him the boys resumed their rowing, Reese taking a seat in front of him, and Thor could feel the boat moving. Within minutes, the rain wall lightened up ahead.

As he rowed and rowed, his skin burning from this strange rain, every muscle in his body aching, finally the sound of the rain began to subside, and Thor began to feel less water pouring down on his head. In a few more moments, they entered a sunny sky.

Thor looked about, shocked: it was completely dry, bright. It was the strangest thing he had ever experienced: half the boat was under a dry, shining sun, while the other half was being poured on as they passed through the rain wall.

Finally, the entire boat was under a clear blue and yellow sky, the warm sun beating down on them. It was silent now, the rain wall disappearing fast, and all of his brothers in arms looked at each other, stunned. It was as if they had passed through a curtain, to another realm.

“YIELD!” yelled Kolk.

All around Thor boys dropped their oars with a collective groan, gasping, catching their breath. Thor did the same, feeling every muscle in his body trembling and so grateful to have a break. He slumped over, gasped for air and tried to relax his aching muscles as their boat glided into these new waters.

Thor finally regained himself and stood and looked around. He looked down at the water, and saw that it had changed color: it was now a light, glowing red. They had entered a different sea.

“The Sea of Dragons,” Reese said, beside him, also looking down in wonder. “They say it runs red with the blood of its victims.”

Thor looked down at it. It bubbled in places, and in the distance strange beasts surfaced from the water momentarily, then submerged. None lingered long enough for him to get a good look at them, but he did not want to try his luck and lean down any closer.

Thor turned and took it all in, disoriented. Everything here, on this side of the rain wall, seemed so foreign, so different. There was even a slight red mist in the air, hovering low over the water. He

surveyed the horizon and spotted dozens of small islands, spread out, like stepping stones on the horizon.

A strong breeze picked up and Kolk stepped forward and barked:

“RAISE THE SAILS!”

Thor jumped into action with all the boys around him, grabbing the ropes, and hoisting them to catch the breeze. The sails caught and a gust of wind carried them. Thor felt the boat moving beneath them faster than it ever had, and they aimed for the islands. The boat rocked on huge, rolling waves, which rose up out of nowhere, gently moving up and down.

Thor made his way towards the bow, leaned against the rail and looked out. Reese came up beside him, and O’Connor came up on his other side. They all stood side-by-side, and Thor watched as the chain of islands fast approached. They stood there in silence for a long time, Thor relishing the moist breezes as his body relaxed.

Finally, Thor realized they aimed for one island in particular. It grew larger, and Thor felt a chill as he realized it was their destination.

“The Isle of Mist,” Reese said, in awe.

Thor studied it in wonder. Its shape began to come into focus—it was rocky and craggy, barren, and it stretched several miles in each direction, long and narrow, shaped like a horseshoe. Huge waves crash against its shore, rumbling even from here, creating huge sprays of foam as they met enormous boulders. There was the tiniest strip of land beyond the boulders, and then a wall of cliffs which soared straight up, high into the air. Thor did not see how their boat could safely land.

Adding to the strangeness of this place, a red mist lingered all over the island, like a dew, sparkling in the sun. It gave it an ominous feel. Thor could sense something inhuman, unearthly, about this place.

“They say it’s survived millions of years,” O’Connor added. “It’s older than the Ring. Older, even, than the Empire.”

“It belongs to the dragons,” Elden added, coming up beside Reese.

As Thor watched, suddenly the second sun plummeted in the sky; in moments the day went from sunny and bright to nearly sunset, the sky tainted with reds and purples. He could not believe it: he had never seen the sun move that quickly before. He wondered what else was different in this part of the world.

“Does a dragon live on this isle?” Thor asked.

Elden shook his head.

“No. I hear it lives close by. They say that red mist is forged from a dragon’s breath. He breathes at night on a neighboring island, and the wind carries it and covers the island by day.”

Thor heard a sudden noise; at first it sounded like a low rumble, like thunder, long and loud enough to shake the boat. Krohn, still in his shirt, ducked his head and whined.

The others all spun and Thor turned too and looked out; somewhere on the horizon he thought he could see the faint outline of flames licking the sunset, then disappearing in black smoke, like a small volcano erupting.

“The Dragon,” Reese said. “We are in its territory now.”

Thor swallowed, wondering.

“But then how can we be safe here?” O’Connor asked.

“You’re not safe anywhere,” came a resounding voice.

Thor spun to see Kolk standing there, hands on his hips, watching the horizon over their shoulders.

“That is the point of The Hundred, to live with the risk of death each day. This is not an exercise. The dragon lives close, and there’s nothing to stop him from attacking. He likely will not,

because he jealously guards his treasure on his own isle, and dragons don't like to leave treasure unprotected. But you will hear his roars, and see his flames at night. And if we anger him somehow, there's no telling what could happen."

Thor heard another low rumble, saw another burst of flame on the horizon, and watched as they got closer and closer to the isle, waves crashing against it. He looked up at the steep cliffs, a wall of rock, and wondered how they would ever get up to the top, to its flat and dry land.

"But I see nowhere for a ship to dock," Thor said.

"That would be too easy," Kolk shot back.

"Then how do we get onto the island?" O'Connor asked.

Kolk smiled down, an evil smile.

"You swim," he said.

For a moment, Thor wondered if he was kidding; but then he realized from the look on his face that he was not. Thor swallowed.

"Swim?" Reese echoed, unbelieving.

"Those waters are teeming with creatures!" Elden said.

"Oh, that's the least of it," Kolk continued. "Those tides are treacherous; those whirlpools will suck you down; those waves will smash you into those jagged rocks; the water is hot; and if you make it past the rocks, you'll have to find a way to climb those cliffs, to reach dry land. If the sea creatures don't get you first. Welcome to your new home."

Thor stood there with the others, at the rail's edge, looking down at the foaming sea beneath him. The water swirled beneath him like a living thing, the tides growing stronger by the second, rocking the boat, making it harder to keep his balance. Down below, the waters raged, churning, a bright red which seemed to contain the blood of hell itself. Worse of all, as Thor watched closely,

these waters were disturbed every few feet by the surfacing of another sea monster, rising up, snapping its long teeth, then submerging.

Their ship suddenly dropped anchor, so far from shore, and Thor swallowed. He looked up at the boulders framing the island, and wondered how they would make it from here to there. The crashing of the waves grew louder by the second, making others have to shout to be heard.

As he watched, several small rowboats were lowered into the water, then guided by the commanders far from the ship, a good thirty yards. They would not make it that easy: they would have to swim to reach them.

The thought of it made Thor's stomach turn.

"JUMP!" Kolk screamed.

For the first time, Thor felt afraid. He wondered if that made him less of a Legion member, less of a warrior. He knew that warriors should be fearless at all times. But he had to admit to himself that he felt fear now. He hated the fact that he did, and he wished it could be otherwise. But he did.

But as Thor looked around and saw the terrified faces of the other boys, he felt better. All around him boys stood close to the rail, frozen in fear, staring down at the waters. One boy in particular was so scared that he shook. It was the boy from the day of the shields, the one who had been afraid, who had been forced to run laps.

Kolk must have sensed it, because he crossed the boat towards him. Kolk seemed unaffected as the wind threw back his hair, grimacing as he went, looking ready to conquer nature itself. He came up beside him and his scowl deepened.

"JUMP!" Kolk screamed.

"No!" the boy answered. "I can't! I won't do it! I can't swim! Take me back home!"

Kolk walked right up to the boy, as he was beginning to back away from the rail, grabbed him by the back of his shirt, and hoisted him high off the ground.

“Then you shall learn to swim!” Kolk snarled, and then, to Thor’s disbelief, he hurled the boy over the edge.

The boy went flying through the air, screaming, as he plummeted a good fifteen feet towards the foaming sea. He landed with a splash, then floated to the surface, flailing, gasping for air.

“HELP!” he screamed.

“What’s the first law of the Legion?” Kolk screamed out, turning to the other boys on ship, ignoring the boy in the water.

Thor was dimly aware of the correct response, but was too distracted by the sight of the boy, drowning below, to answer.

“To help a fellow Legion member in need!” Elden screamed out.

“And is he in need?” Kolk yelled, pointing down to the boy.

The boy raised his arms, bobbing in and out of the water, and the other boys stood on deck, staring, all too scared to dive in.

At that moment, something funny happened to Thor. As he focused on the drowning boy, everything else fell away. Thor no longer thought of himself. The fact that he might die never even entered his mind. The sea, the monsters, the tides...it all faded away. All he could think of was rescuing someone else.

Thor stepped up onto the wide, oak rail, bent his knees, and without thinking, leapt high into the air, heading face first for the bubbling red of the waters beneath him.

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