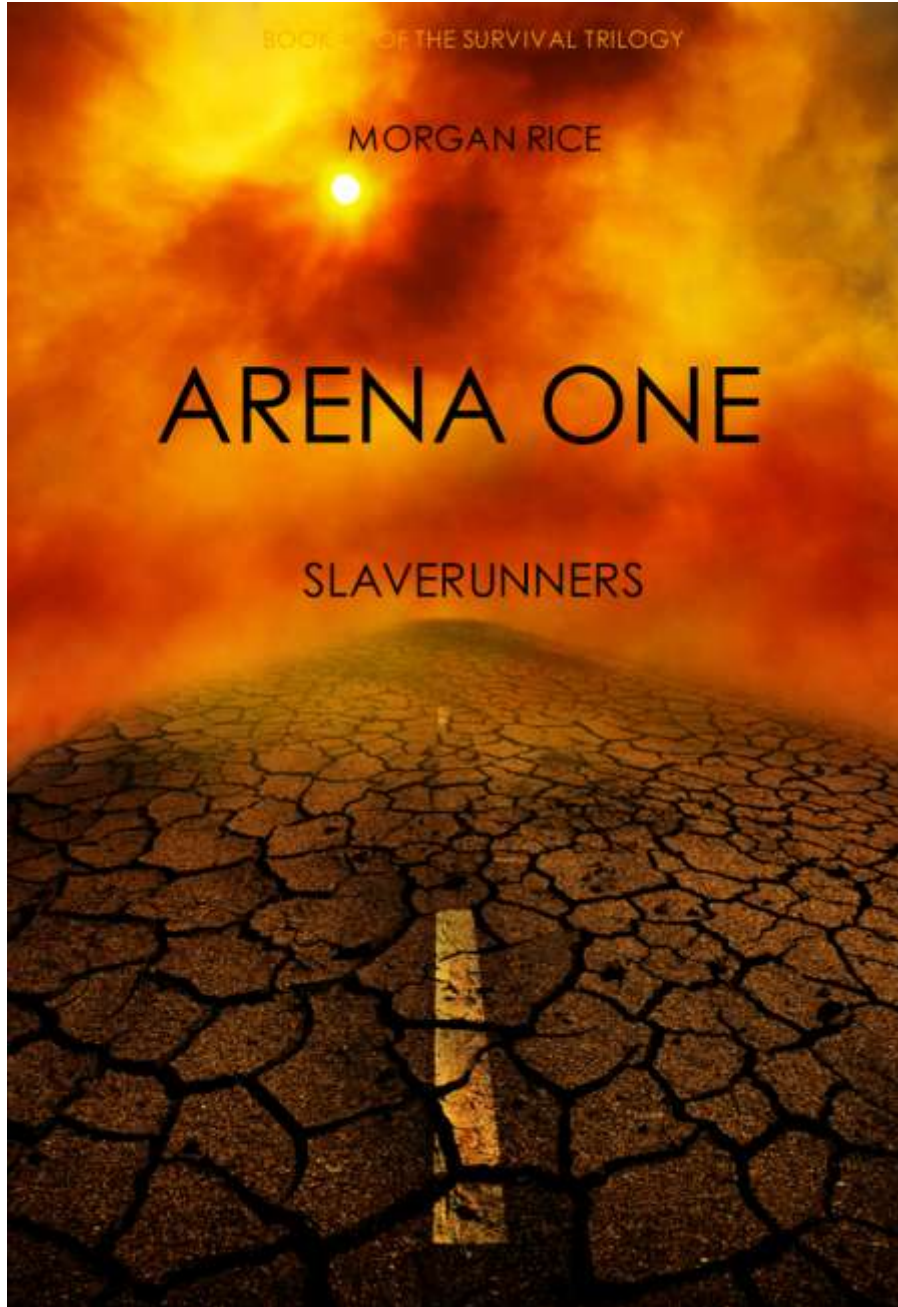


BOOK 1 OF THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY

MORGAN RICE

# ARENA ONE

SLAVERUNNERS



# ARENA ONE

SLAVERUNNERS

(BOOK #1 OF THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY)

MORGAN RICE

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“Grabbed my attention from the beginning and did not let go....This story is an amazing adventure that is fast paced and action packed from the very beginning. There is not a dull moment to be found.”

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## About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling author of THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, a young adult series comprising eleven books (and counting); the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); and the #1 bestselling epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising thirteen books (and counting).

Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations of the books are available in German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Chinese, Swedish, Dutch, Turkish, Hungarian, Czech and Slovak (with more languages forthcoming).

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THE SORCERER'S RING



THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY



the vampire journals





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“Had I but died an hour before this chance,  
I had lived a blessed time; for, from this instant,  
There’s nothing serious in mortality.”

--Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

# PART I

## ONE

Today is less forgiving than most. The wind whips relentlessly, brushing clumps of snow off the heavy pine and right into my face as I hike straight up the mountain face. My feet, crammed into hiking boots a size too small, disappear in the six inches of snow. I slip and slide, struggling to find my footing. The wind comes in gusts, so cold it takes my breath away. I feel as if I'm walking into a living snow globe.

Bree tells me it's December. She likes to count down the days to Christmas, scratching off the numbers each day on an old calendar she found. She does it with such enthusiasm, I can't bring myself to tell her we're nowhere near December. I won't tell her that her calendar is three years old, or that we'll never get a new one, because they stopped making them the day the world ended. I won't deny her her fantasy. That's what big sisters are for.

Bree clings to her beliefs anyway, and she's always believed that snow means December, and even if I told her, I doubt it would change her mind. That's a ten-year-old for you.

What Bree refuses to see is that winter comes early up here. We're high up in the Catskills, and here, there's a different sense of time, a different turn to the seasons. Here, three hours north of what was once New York City, the leaves drop by the end of August, scattering across mountain ranges that stretch as far as the eye can see.

Our calendar was current once. When we first arrived, three years ago, I remember seeing the first snow and then checking it in disbelief. I couldn't understand how the page read October. I

assumed such early snow was a freak. But I soon learned it wasn't. These mountains are just high enough, just cold enough, for winter to cannibalize fall.

If Bree would just flip back the calendar, she'd see it right there, the old year, in big, tacky letters: 2117. Obviously, three years old. I tell myself she's just too caught up in her excitement to check closely. This is what I hope. But lately, a part of me is beginning to suspect that she really knows, that she's just chosen to lose herself in fantasy. I can't blame her.

Of course, we haven't had a working calendar for years. Or cell phone, or computer, or TV, or radio, or internet, or technology of any kind—not to mention electricity, or running water. Yet somehow, we've managed to make it, just the two of us, for three years like this. The summers have been tolerable, with fewer hungry days. We can at least fish then, and the mountain creeks always seemed to carry salmon. There are also berries, and even a few wild apple and pear orchards that still, after all this time, bear fruit. Once in a while, we even manage to catch a rabbit.

But the winters are intolerable. Everything is frozen, or dead, and each year I am certain we will not make it. And this has been the worst winter of all. I keep telling myself things will turn around; but it's been days now without a decent meal, and winter has just begun. We are both weak from hunger, and now Bree is also sick. It doesn't bode well.

As I trudge up the mountain face, retracing the same luckless steps I took yesterday, searching for our next meal, I am beginning to feel our luck has run out. It is only the thought of Bree lying there, waiting at home, that urges me forward. I stop pitying myself and instead hold her face in my mind. I know I can't find medicine, but I am hoping it's just a passing fever, and that a good meal and some warmth are all she needs.

What she really needs is a fire. But I never light fires in our fireplace anymore; I can't risk the smoke, the smell, tipping off a slaverunner to our location. But tonight I will surprise her, and just for a little while, take the chance. Bree lives for fires, and it will lift her spirits. And if I can just find a

meal to complement it—even something as small as a rabbit—it will complete her recovery. Not just physically. I've noticed her starting to lose hope these last few days—I can see it in her eyes—and I need her to stay strong. I refuse to sit back and watch her slip away, like Mom did.

A new gust of wind slaps me in the face, and this one is so long and vicious I need to lower my head and wait until it passes. The wind roars in my ears, and I would do anything for a real winter coat. I wear only a worn hoodie, one I found years ago by the side of the road. I think it was a boy's, but that's good, because the sleeves are long enough to cover my hands and almost double as gloves. At five-six I'm not exactly short, so whoever owned this must have been tall. Sometimes I wonder if he'd care that I'm wearing his clothing. But then I realize he's probably dead. Just like everybody else.

My pants aren't much better: I still wear the same pair of jeans, I'm embarrassed to note, that I've had on since we escaped the city all those years ago. If there's one thing I regret, it's leaving so hastily. I guess I'd assumed I'd find some clothes up here, that maybe a clothing store would still be open somewhere, or even a Salvation Army. That was stupid of me: of course, all the clothing stores had long ago been looted. It was as if, overnight, the world went from a place of plenty to a place of scarcity. I'd managed to find a few pieces of clothing scattered in drawers in my Dad's house. These I gave to Bree. I was happy that at least some of his clothes, like his thermals and socks, could keep her warm.

The wind finally stops, and I raise my head and hurry straight up before it can pick up again, forcing myself at double speed, until I reach the plateau.

I reach the top, breathing hard, my legs on fire, and slowly look around. The trees are more sparse up here and in the distance is a small mountain lake. It's frozen, like all the others, and the sun glares off of it with enough intensity to make me squint.

I immediately look over at my fishing rod, the one I'd left the day before, wedged between two boulders. It sticks out over the lake, a long piece of string dangling from it into a small hole in the ice. If the rod is bent, it means Bree and I will have dinner tonight. If not, I'll know it didn't work—again. I hurry between a cluster of trees, through the snow, and get a good look.

It's straight. Of course.

My heart sinks. I debate walking out onto the ice, using my small axe to chop a hole elsewhere. But I already know it won't make a difference. The problem is not its position—the problem is this lake. The ground is too frozen for me to dig up worms, and I don't even know where to look for them. I'm not a natural hunter, or trapper. If I'd known I'd end up here, I would have devoted my entire childhood to Outward Bound, to survival techniques. But now I find myself useless in most everything. I don't know how to set traps, and my fishing lines rarely catch a thing.

Being my father's daughter, a Marine's daughter, the one thing I am good at—knowing how to fight—is useless up here. If I am helpless against the animal kingdom, at least I can handle myself against the two-legged ones. From the time I was young, like it or not, Dad insisted I be his daughter—a Marine's daughter, and proud of it. He also wanted me to be the son he never had. He enrolled me in boxing, wrestling, mixed martial arts...there were endless lessons on how to use a knife, how to fire a gun, how to find pressure points, how to fight dirty. Most of all, he insisted I be tough, that I never show fear, and that I never cry.

Ironically, I have never had a chance to use a single thing he taught me, and it all couldn't be more useless up here; there is not another person in sight. What I really need to know is how to find food—not how to kick someone. And if I do ever run into another person, I'm not going to be flipping him, but asking for help.

I think hard and recall that there is another lake up here somewhere, a smaller one; I saw it once, one summer when I was adventurous and hiked farther up the mountain. It's a steep quarter-mile, and I haven't tried to go up there since.

I look up and sigh. The sun is already going down, a morose winter sunset cast in a reddish hue, and I'm already weak, tired, and frozen. It will take most of what I've got just to make it back down the mountain. The last thing I want is to hike farther up. But a small voice inside me urges me to keep climbing. The more time I spend alone these days, the stronger Dad's voice is becoming in my head. I resent it and want to block it out, but somehow, I can't.

*Stop whining and keep pushing, Moore!*

Dad always liked to call me by my last name. Moore. It annoyed me, but he didn't care.

If I go back now, Bree will have nothing to eat tonight. That lake up there is the best I can come up with, our only other source of food. I also want Bree to have a fire, and all the wood down here is soaked. Up there, where the wind is stronger, I might find wood dry enough for kindling. I take one more look straight up the mountain, and decide to go for it. I lower my head and begin the hike, taking my rod with me.

Each step is painful, a million sharp needles pulsing in my thighs, icy air piercing my lungs. The wind picks up and the snow whips, like sandpaper on my face. A bird caws way up high, as if mocking me. Just when I feel I can't take one more step, I reach the next plateau.

This one, so high up, is different than all the others: it is densely packed with pine trees, making it difficult to see more than ten feet. The sky is shut out under their huge canopy, and the snow is covered with green needles. The huge tree trunks manage to shut out the wind, too. I feel like I've entered a small private kingdom, hidden from the rest of the world.

I stop and turn, taking in the vista: the view is amazing. I'd always thought we had a great view from Dad's house, halfway up the mountain, but from here, up top, it is spectacular. Mountain



peaks soar in every direction, and beyond them, in the distance, I can even see the Hudson River, sparkling. I also see the winding roads that cut their way through the mountain, remarkably intact. Probably because so few people ever come up here. I've never, in fact, seen a car, or any other vehicle. Despite the snow, the roads are clear; the steep, angular roads, basking in the sun, lend themselves perfectly to drainage, and amazingly, much of the snow has melted off.

I am struck by a pang of worry. I prefer when the roads are covered in snow and ice, when they are impassable to vehicles, because the only people who have cars and fuel these days are slaverunners—merciless bounty hunters that work to feed Arena One. They patrol everywhere, looking for any survivors, to kidnap them and bring them to the arena as slaves. There, I'm told, they make them fight to the death for entertainment.

Bree and I have been lucky. We haven't seen any slaverunners in the years we've been up here—but I think that's only because we live so high up, in such a remote area. Only once did I hear the high-pitched whine of a slaverunner's engine, far off in the distance, on the other side of the river. I know they are down there, somewhere, patrolling. And I don't take any chances—I make sure we keep a low profile, rarely burning wood unless we need to, and keeping a close eye on Bree at all times. Most of the times I take her hunting with me—I would have today if she weren't so sick.

I turn back to the plateau and fix my eyes on the smaller lake. Frozen solid, shining in the afternoon light, it sits there like a lost jewel, hiding behind a copse of trees. I approach it, taking a few tentative steps on the ice to make sure it doesn't crack. Once I feel it's solid, I take a few more. I find a spot, remove the small axe from my belt and chop down hard, several times. A crack appears. I remove my knife, take a knee and strike hard, right in the center of the crack. I work the tip of the knife in there and carve a small hole, just big enough to extract a fish.

I hurry back to shore, slipping and sliding, then wedge the fishing rod between two tree branches, unravel the string, and run back out and drop it in the hole. I yank it a few times, hoping

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