

A CLASH OF HONOR

(BOOK #4 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 four 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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“Rice does a great job of pulling you into the story from the beginning, utilizing a great descriptive quality that transcends the mere painting of the setting....Nicely written and an extremely fast read.”

--Black Lagoon Reviews (regarding *Turned*)

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“Morgan Rice proves herself again to be an extremely talented storyteller....This would appeal to a wide range of audiences, including younger fans of the vampire/fantasy genre. It ended with an unexpected cliffhanger that leaves you shocked.”

--The Romance Reviews {regarding *Loved*}

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A MARCH OF KINGS (Book #2)

A FEAST OF DRAGONS (Book #3)

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“Be not afraid of greatness:
 some are born great,
 some achieve greatness,
and some have greatness thrust upon them.”

—William Shakespeare
Twelfth Night

CHAPTER ONE

Luanda charged across the battlefield, narrowly avoiding a galloping horse as she weaved her way towards the small dwelling that held King McCloud. She clutched the cold, iron spike in her hand, trembling, as she crossed the dusty grounds of this city she once knew, this city of her people. She had been forced all these months to witness their being butchered—and she'd had enough. Something inside her snapped. She no longer cared if she went up against the entire McCloud army—she would do whatever she could to stop it.

Luanda knew that what she was about to do was crazy, that she was taking her life into her hands, and that McCloud would likely kill her. But she pushed these thoughts from her mind as she ran. The time had come to do what was right—at any cost.

Across the crowded battlefield, amidst the soldiers, she spotted McCloud in the distance, carrying that poor, screaming girl into an abandoned dwelling, a small clay house. He slammed the door behind them, raising a cloud of dust.

“Luanda!” came a shout.

She turned and saw Bronson, perhaps a hundred yards behind, chasing after her. His progress was interrupted by the endless stream of horses and soldiers, forcing him to stop several times.

Now was her chance. If Bronson caught up to her, he would prevent her from going through with it.

Luanda doubled her speed, clutching the spike, and tried not to think how crazy this all was, how slim her chances were. If entire armies could not bring down McCloud, if his own generals, his own son, trembled before him, what chance did she, alone, possibly have?

Moreover, Luanda had never killed a man before, much less a man of McCloud's stature. Would she freeze up when the time came? Could she really sneak up on him? Was he impervious, as Bronson had warned?

Luanda felt implicit in this army's bloodshed, in the ruin of her own land. Looking back, she regretted that she had ever agreed to marry a McCloud, despite her love for Bronson. The McClouds, she had learned, were a savage people, beyond correction. The MacGills had been lucky that the Highlands divided them, she realized that now, and that they had stayed on their side of the Ring. She had been naïve, had been stupid to assume that the McClouds were not as bad as she had been raised to think. She thought that she could change them, that having a chance to be a McCloud princess—and one day queen—was somehow worth it, whatever the risk.

But now she knew that she was wrong. She would give up everything—give up her title, her riches, her fame, all of it—to have never met the McClouds, to be back in safety, with her family, on her side of the Ring. She was mad at her father now for having arranged this marriage; she was young and naïve, but he should have known better. Was politics so important to him, to sacrifice his own daughter? She was mad at him, too, for dying, for leaving her alone with all of this.

Luanda had learned the hard way, these last few months, to depend on herself, and now was her chance to make things right.

She trembled as she reached the small clay house, with its dark, oak door, slammed shut. She turned and looked both ways, expecting McCloud's men to bear down on her; but to her relief, they were all too preoccupied with the havoc they were wreaking to notice.

She reached up, the stake in one hand, and grabbed the knob, turning it as delicately as she could, praying she did not alert McCloud.

She stepped inside. It was dark in here, and her eyes adjusted slowly from the harsh sunlight of the white city; it was cooler in here, too, and as she stepped across the threshold of the small house,

the first thing she heard was the moans and cries of the girl. As her eyes adjusted she looked over in the small house and saw McCloud, undressed from the waist down, on the floor, the girl undressed, struggling beneath him. The girl cried and screamed, her eyes bunched up, as McCloud reached up and clamped her mouth shut with his beefy palm.

Luanda could hardly believe this was real, could hardly believe she was really going through with this. She took a tentative step forward, her hands shaking, her knees weak, and prayed that she would have the strength to carry through. She clutched the iron spike as if it were her lifeline.

Please, god, let me kill this man.

She heard McCloud grunting and groaning, like a wild animal, having his fill. He was relentless. The girl's screams seemed to amplify with his every move.

Luanda took another step, then another, and was just feet away. She looked down at McCloud, studied his body, trying to decide the best place to strike. Luckily he had removed his chainmail and wore only a thin, cloth shirt, now drenched in sweat. She could smell it from here, and she recoiled. Removing his armor was a careless move on his part, and it would be, Luanda decided, his last mistake. She would raise the spike high, with both hands, and plunge it into his exposed back.

As McCloud's groans reached their peak, Luanda raised the spike high. She thought of how her life would change after this moment, how, in just seconds, nothing would ever be the same. The McCloud kingdom would be free of their tyrant king; her people would be spared from further destruction. Her new husband would rise and take his place, and finally, all would be well.

Luanda stood there, frozen with fear. She trembled. She knew that if she did not act now, she never would.

She held her breath, took one final step forward, raised the spike high overhead with both hands, and suddenly dropped to her knees, plunging the iron down with all she had, preparing to drive it through the man's back.

But something happened which she did not expect, and it all happened in a blur, too fast for her to react: at the last second McCloud rolled out of the way. For a man with his bulk, he was much faster than she could imagine. He rolled to one side, leaving the girl beneath him exposed, and it was too late for Luanda to stop the plunge.

The iron spike continued, to Luanda's horror, plunging all the way down—and into the girl's chest.

The girl sat straight up, shrieking, and Luanda was mortified to feel the spike piercing her flesh, inches deep, all the way to her heart. Blood gurgled from her mouth and she looked at Luanda, terrified, betrayed.

Finally, she lay back down, dead.

Luanda knelt there, numb, traumatized, hardly grasping what had just happened. Before she could process it all, before she could realize that McCloud was safe, she felt a stinging blow on the side of her face, and felt herself go down to the ground.

As she flew through the air, she was dimly aware that McCloud had just punched her, a tremendous blow, to the face, had sent her flying, had indeed anticipated her every move since she had walked into the room. He had feigned ignorance. He had waited for his moment, waited for the perfect chance to not only dodge her blow, but to trick her into killing this poor girl at the same time, to put the guilt of it on her head.

Before her world dimmed, Luanda caught a glimpse of McCloud's face. He was grinning down, mouth open, breathing hard, like a wild beast. The last thing she heard, before his giant boot rose up and came down for her face, was his guttural voice, spilling out like an animal:

“You did me a favor,” he said. “I was through with her anyway.”

CHAPTER TWO

Gwendolyn ran down the twisting side streets of the worst part of King's Court, tears streaming down her cheeks as she ran from the castle, trying to get as far away from Gareth as she could. Her heart still raced since their confrontation, since seeing Firth hanging, since hearing Gareth's threats. She desperately tried to extricate the truth from his lies. But in Gareth's sick mind, the truth and lies were all twisted together, and it was so hard to know what was real. Had he been trying to scare her? Or was everything he'd said true?

Gwendolyn had seen Firth's dangling body with her own eyes, and that told her that perhaps, this time, all of it was true. Perhaps Godfrey had indeed been poisoned; perhaps she had indeed been sold off into marriage, and to the savage Nevaruns no less; and perhaps Thor was right now riding into an ambush. The thought of it made her shudder.

She felt helpless as she ran. She had to make it right. She could not run all the way to Thor, but she could run to Godfrey and could see if he was indeed poisoned—and if he still lived.

Gwendolyn sprinted deeper into the seedy part of town, amazed to find herself back here again, twice in as many days, in this disgusting part of King's Court to which she had vowed to never return. If Godfrey had truly been poisoned, she knew it would happen at the ale house. Where else? She was mad at him for returning, for lowering his guard, for being so careless. But most of all, she feared for him. She realized how much she had come to care for her brother these last few days, and the thought of losing him, too, especially after losing her father, left a hole in her heart. She also felt somehow responsible.

Gwen felt real fear as she ran through these streets, and not because of the drunks and scoundrels all around her; rather, she feared her brother, Gareth. He had seemed demonic in their last meeting, and she could not get the image of his face, of his eyes, from her mind—so black, so soulless. He looked possessed. His sitting on their father's throne had made the image even more surreal. She feared his retribution. Perhaps he was, indeed, plotting to marry her off, something she would never allow; or perhaps he just wanted to throw her off guard, and he was really planning to assassinate her. Gwen looked around, and as she ran, every face seemed hostile, foreign. Everyone seemed like a potential threat, sent by Gareth to finish her off. She was becoming paranoid.

Gwen turned the corner and bumped shoulders with a drunken old man, knocking her off balance, and she jumped and screamed involuntarily. She was on-edge. It took her a moment to realize it was just a careless passerby, not one of Gareth's henchmen; she turned and saw him stumble, not even turning back to apologize. The indignity of this part of town was more than she could stomach. If it were not for Godfrey she would never come near it, and she hated him for making her stoop to this. Why couldn't he just stay away from the alehouses?

Gwen turned another corner and there it was: Godfrey's tavern of choice, an excuse of an establishment, sitting there crooked, door ajar, drunks spilling out of it, as they perpetually did. She wasted no time, and hurried through its open door.

It took her eyes a moment to adjust in the dim bar, which reeked of stale ale and body odor; as she entered, the place fell silent. The two dozen or so men stuffed inside all turned and looked at her, surprised. Here she was, a member of the royal family, dressed in finery, charging into this room that probably hadn't been cleaned in years.

She marched up to a tall man with a large belly whom she recognized as Akorth, one of Godfrey's drinking companions.

"Where's my brother?" she demanded.

Akorth, usually in high spirits, usually ready to unleash a tawdry joke that he himself was too satisfied with, surprised her: he merely shook his head.

“It does not fare well, my lady,” he said, grim.

“What do you mean?” she insisted, her heart thumping.

“He took some bad ale,” said a tall, lean man whom she recognized as Fulton, Gareth’s other companion. “He went down late last night. Hasn’t gotten up.”

“Is he alive?” she asked, frantic, grabbing Akorth’s wrist.

“Barely,” he answered, looking down. “He’s had a rough go. He stopped speaking about an hour ago.”

“Where is he?” she insisted.

“In the back, missus,” said the barkeep, leaning across the bar as he wiped a mug, looking grim himself. “And you best have a plan to deal with him. I’m not going to have a corpse lingering in my establishment.”

Gwen, overwhelmed, surprised herself and drew a small dagger, leaning forward and holding the tip to the barkeep’s throat.

He gulped, looking back in shock, as the place fell deadly silent.

“First of all,” she said, “this place is not an *establishment*—it is an excuse of a watering hole, and one that I will have razed to the ground by the royal guard if you address me that way again. You may begin by addressing me as *my lady*.”

Gwen felt outside of herself, and was surprised by the strength overcoming her; she had no idea where it was coming from.

The barkeep gulped.

“My lady,” he echoed.

Gwen held the dagger steady.

“Secondly, my brother shall not die—and certainly not in this place. His corpse would do your establishment far more honor than any living soul who has passed through here. And if he does die, you can be sure the blame will fall on you.”

“But I did nothing wrong, my lady!” he pleaded. “It was the same ale I served to everybody else!”

“Someone must have poisoned it,” Akorth added.

“It could have been anyone,” Fulton said.

Gwen slowly lowered her dagger.

“Bring me to him. Now!” she ordered.

The barkeep lowered his head in humility this time, and turned and hurried through a side door behind the bar. Gwen followed on his heels, Akorth and Fulton joining her.

Gwen entered the small back room of the tavern and heard herself gasp as she saw her brother, Godfrey, laid out on the floor, supine. He looked more pale than she had ever seen him. He looked a step away from death. It was all true.

Gwen rushed to his side, grasped his hand and felt how cold and clammy it was. He did not respond, his head lying on the floor, unshaven, greasy hair clinging to his forehead. But she felt his pulse, and while weak, it was still beating; she also saw his chest rise with each breath. He was alive.

She felt a sudden rage well up within her.

“How you could leave him here like this?” she screamed, wheeling to the barkeep. “My brother, a member of the royal family, left alone to lie like a dog on the floor while he’s dying?”

The barkeep gulped, looking nervous.

“And what else was I supposed to do, my lady?” he asked, sounding unsure. “This is not a hospital. Everyone said he was basically dead and—”

“He is *not* dead!” she screamed. “And you two,” she said, turning to Akorth and Fulton, “what kind of friends are you? Would he have left you like this?”

Akorth and Fulton exchanged a meekish glance.

“Forgive me,” Akorth said. “The doctor came last night and looked at him and said he was dying—and that all that was left was for time to take him. I didn’t think anything could be done.”

“We stayed with him most the night, my lady,” Fulton added, “at his side. We just took a quick break, had a drink to pass our sorrows, and then you came in and—”

Gwen reached up and in a rage swatted both of their mugs from their hands, sending their cups of ale flying to the floor, the liquid spilling everywhere. They looked up at her, shocked.

“Each of you, grab one end of him,” she ordered coldly, standing, feeling a new strength rise within her. “You will carry him from this place. You will follow me across all of King’s Court until we reach the Royal Healer. My brother will be given a chance for real recovery, and will not be left to die based on the proclamation of some dim-witted doctor.

“And you,” she added, turning to the barkeep. “If my brother should live, and if he should ever return to this place and you agree to serve him a drink, I shall see to it firsthand that you are thrown in the dungeon never to come out.”

The barkeep shifted in place and lowered his head.

“Now move!” she screamed.

Akorth and Fulton flinched, and jumped into action. Gwen hurried from the room, the two of them right behind her, carrying her brother, following her out the bar and into daylight.

They began to hurry down the crowded back streets of King’s Court, towards the healer, and Gwen only prayed that it was not too late.

CHAPTER THREE

Thor galloped across the dusty terrain of the outer reaches of King's Court, Reece, O'Connor, Elden and the twins by his side, Krohn racing beside him, Kendrick, Kolk, Brom and scores of Legion and Silver riding with them, a great army heading west to meet the McClouds. They rode as one, heading east to liberate the city, and the sound of hooves was deafening, rumbling like thunder. They had been riding all day, and already the second sun was long in the sky. Thor could hardly believe he was riding with these great warriors, on his first real military mission. He felt that they had accepted him as one of theirs. Indeed, the entire Legion had been called up as reserves, and his brothers in arms rode all around him. The Legion members were dwarfed by the thousands of members of the king's army, and Thor, for the first time in his life, felt a part of something greater than himself.

Thor also felt a driving sense of purpose. He felt needed. His fellow citizens were under siege by the McClouds, and it was left to them to liberate them, to save his people from a horrible fate. The importance of what they were doing weighed on him like a living thing—and it made him feel alive.

Thor felt security in the presence of all these men, but he also felt a sense of worry, too: this was an army of real men, but that also meant that they were about to face an army of real men. Real, hardened warriors. It was life and death this time, and there was far more at stake here than he had ever encountered. As he rode, he reached down instinctively and felt reassured by the presence of

his trusted sling, by the presence of his new sword. He wondered if by the day's end it would be stained with blood. Or if he himself would be wounded.

Their army suddenly let out a great shout, louder even than the horses' hooves, as they rounded a bend and on the horizon spotted for the first time the besieged city. Black smoke rose up in great clouds from it, and the MacGil army kicked their horses, gaining speed. Thor, too, kicked his horse harder, trying to keep up with the others as they all drew their swords, raised their weapons, and headed for the city with deadly intent.

The massive army was broken down into smaller groups, and in Thor's group there rode ten soldiers, legion members, his friends and a few others he did not know. At their head rode one of the king's army's senior commanders, a soldier the others called Forg, a tall, thin man with a wiry build, pockmarked skin, cropped, gray hair and dark, hollow eyes. The army was breaking down into smaller groups and forking in every direction.

"This group, follow me!" he commanded, gesturing with his staff for Thor and the others to fork off and follow his lead.

Thor's group followed orders and fell in behind him; as they went, he found they were forking farther away from the main army. Thor looked back and noticed that his group forked farther than most, the army becoming more distant, and just as Thor was wondering where they were being lead, Forg shouted:

"We will take up a position on the McCloud flank!"

Thor and the others exchanged a nervous and excited look as they all charged, forking until the main army was out of sight.

Soon they were in a new terrain, and the city fell out of sight completely. Thor was on guard, but there was no sign of the McCloud army anywhere.

Finally, Forg pulled his horse to a stop before a small hill, in a grove of trees. The others came to a stop behind him.

Thor and the others looked at Forg, wondering why he had stopped.

“That keep there, that is our mission,” Forg explained. “You are young warriors still, so we want to spare you from the heat of battle. You will hold this position as our main army sweeps through the city and confronts the army. It is unlikely any McCloud soldiers will come this way, and you will be mostly safe here. Take positions around it, and stay here until we say otherwise. Now move!”

Forg kicked his horse and charged up the hill, and Thor and the others did the same, following him. The small group rode across the dusty plains, kicking up a cloud, with no one in site as far as Thor could see. He felt disappointed to be removed from the main action; why were they all being so sheltered?

The more they rode, the more something felt off to Thor. He couldn't place it, but his sixth sense was telling him that something was wrong.

As they neared the hilltop, atop which sat a small, ancient keep, a tall, skinny tower that looked abandoned, something within Thor told him to look behind him. As he did, he saw Forg. Thor was surprised to see that Forg had gradually dropped behind the group, gaining more and more distance, and as Thor watched, Forg turned around, kicked his horse and without warning, galloped the other way.

Thor could not understand what was happening. Why had Forg left them so suddenly? Beside him, Krohn whined.

Just as Thor was beginning to process what was happening, they reached the hilltop, reached the ancient keep, expecting to see nothing but wasteland before them.

But the small group of legion members pulled their horses to an abrupt stop. They sat there, all of them, frozen at the site before them.

There, facing them, waiting, was the entire McCloud army.

They had need led right into a trap.

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