

A RITE OF SWORDS

(BOOK #7 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 seven 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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“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.”

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A MARCH OF KINGS (Book #2)
A FEAST OF DRAGONS (Book #3)
A CLASH OF HONOR (Book #4)
A VOW OF GLORY (Book #5)
A CHARGE OF VALOR (Book #6)
A RITE OF SWORDS (Book #7)

THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY

ARENA ONE: SLAVERSUNNERS (Book #1)
ARENA TWO (Book #2)

THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS

TURNED (Book #1)
LOVED (Book #2)
BETRAYED (Book #3)
DESTINED (Book #4)
DESIRED (Book #5)
BETROTHED (Book #6)
VOWED (Book #7)
FOUND (Book #8)

THE VAMPIRE LEGACY

RESURRECTED (Book #1)
CRAVED (Book #2)

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“What is it that you would impart to me?
If it be aught toward the general good,
Set honor in one eye and death in the other,
And I will look on both indifferently,
For let the gods so speed me as I love
The name of honor more than I fear death.”

--William Shakespeare
Julius Caesar

CHAPTER ONE

Thorgrin rode on the back of Mycoples as she flew across the sprawling countryside of the Ring, heading south, somewhere towards Gwendolyn. Thor clutched the Destiny Sword as he looked down and saw below, sprawled out, the endless expanse of Andronicus' million-man army, covering the Ring like a plague of locusts. He felt the Sword throb in his palm, and he knew what it was urging him to do. Protect the Ring. Drive out the invaders. It was almost as if the Sword were commanding him—and Thor was only too happy to oblige.

Very soon, Thor would circle back and make each and every one of the invaders pay. Now that the Shield was restored, Andronicus and his men were trapped; no more Empire reinforcements could filter in, and Thor would not rest until he had killed each and every one.

But now was not yet the time for killing. Thor's first order of business was his one true love, the woman he had pined for ever since had had left these borders: Gwendolyn. Thor ached to lay his eyes upon her once again, to hold her, to know she was alive. Inside his shirt his mother's ring burned, and he could hardly wait to offer it to her, to profess his love, to propose. He wanted her to know that nothing had changed between them, regardless of whatever had happened to her. He still loved her just as much—even more—and he needed her to know that.

Mycoples rumbled gently, and Thor could feel the vibration through her scales. Mycoples, he sensed, was eager to reach Gwendolyn, too, before anything happened to her. Mycoples ducked and weaved in and out of clouds, flapping her great wings, and she seemed content being here, inside the Ring, carrying Thor. Their bond was only growing stronger, and Thor felt that Mycoples shared his every thought and wish. It was like riding an extension of himself.

Thor's thoughts shifted from Gwendolyn as he flew in and out of the clouds. The former Queen's words dominated his thoughts, kept returning to him, as much as Thor preferred to shut them out. Her revelation had pained him beyond what he could imagine. Andronicus? His father?

It couldn't be. A part of Thor hoped it was just another cruel mind game of the former Queen, who, after all, had hated him from the start. Perhaps she had wanted to implant false thoughts in his mind to disturb him, to keep him away from her daughter, for whatever reason. Thor wanted desperately to believe that.

But deep down, as she had spoken the words, they had resonated within Thor's body and soul. He knew them to be true. As much as he would like to think otherwise, the second she had uttered it, he knew that Andronicus was, indeed, his father.

The thought hung over Thor like a nightmare. He had always hoped and prayed, somewhere in the back of his mind, that King MacGil was his father and that somehow Gwen was not truly his daughter, so that they could be together. Thor had always hoped that the day he learned who his father truly was, all would make sense in the world, that his destiny would become clear.

To learn that his father was not a hero was one thing. He could accept that. But to learn that his father was a monster—the worst of all monsters—the man, more than anything, who Thor wanted dead—it was too much to process. Thor carried Andronicus' bloodline. What did that mean for Thor? Did that mean that he, Thor, was destined to be a monster, too? Did that mean that he had some evil streak lurking in his veins? Was he destined to become like him? Or was it possible that he could be different from him, despite their shared blood? Did destiny come in the bloodline? Or did each generation make its own destiny?

Thor also struggled to understand what this all meant for the Destiny Sword. If the legend was true—that only a MacGil could wield it—did that mean Thor was a MacGil? If so, how could Andronicus possibly be his father? Unless Andronicus, somehow, was a MacGil?

Worst of all, how could Thor ever share this news with Gwendolyn? How could he tell her that he was the son of her most-hated enemy? Of the man who had her attacked? Surely, she would hate Thor. She would see Andronicus' face every time she saw Thor's. And yet Thor had to tell her—he couldn't keep this secret from her. Would it ruin their relationship?

Thor's blood boiled with rage. He wanted to flail out at Andronicus for being his father, for doing this to him. As they flew, Thor looked down and scanned the land. He knew that Andronicus was down there somewhere. Soon enough, he would meet him face to face. He would find him. Confront him. And he would kill him.

But first, he had to find Gwendolyn. As they crossed over the Southern Forest, Thor sensed she was close. He had a sinking feeling in his chest that something awful was about to happen to her. He urged Mycoples faster, and faster, feeling that any moment could be her last.

CHAPTER TWO

Gwendolyn stood alone on the upper parapets of the Tower of Refuge, dressed in the black robes the nuns had given her, already feeling as if she had been here forever. She had been greeted in silence, only one nun, her guide, speaking, just once, to instruct her about the rules of this place: there was to be no speaking, no interacting with any of the others. Each woman lived here in her own, separate universe. Each woman wanted to be left alone. This was a tower of refuge, a place for those seeking healing. Gwendolyn would be safe here from all the harms of the world. But also alone. Utterly alone.

Gwendolyn understood, all too well. She wanted to be left alone, too.

She stood there now, atop the tower, looking out at the sweeping view of the treetops of the Southern Forest of the Ring, and felt more alone than she'd ever had in her life. She knew that she should be strong, that she was a fighter. A King's daughter, and wife—or nearly wife—to a great warrior.

But Gwendolyn had to admit that, as much as she yearned to be strong, her heart and her spirit were still wounded. She missed Thor dearly, and she feared he would never return for her. And even if he did, once he found out what had happened to her, she feared he would never want to be with her again.

Gwen also felt hollowed out knowing that Silesia had been destroyed, that Andronicus had won, and that everyone she cared about had already been captured or killed. Andronicus was everywhere now, completely occupied the Ring, and there was nowhere left to turn. Gwen felt hopeless, exhausted, way too exhausted for someone her age. Worse of all, she felt as if she had

let everyone down; she felt as if she had lived too many lifetimes already, and she did not want to see any more.

Gwendolyn took a step forward, up onto the ledge, on the very edge of the parapet, beyond where one was supposed to stand. She lifted her arms slowly and held her palms out to her side. She felt a cold gust of wind, the freezing winds of winter. They knocked her a bit off balance, and she swayed on the edge of the precipice. She looked down and saw the steep plummet below.

Gwendolyn looked up to the sky, and thought of Argon. She wondered where he was, trapped in his own universe, serving his punishment, for her sake. She would give anything to see him now, to hear his wisdom, one last time. Maybe that would save her, make her turn around.

But he was gone, she knew. He, too, had paid a price, and could not come back.

Gwen closed her eyes, and she thought one last time of Thor. If only he were here, that could change everything. If only she had *one* person left alive in the world who truly loved her, maybe that would give her a reason to go on living. She peered into the horizon, hoping beyond reason to see Thor. As she looked into the fast-moving clouds, she thought she heard dimly, somewhere on the horizon, the roar of a dragon. It was so distant, so soft, she must have imagined it. It was just her mind, she knew, playing tricks on her. She knew no dragon could be here, inside the Ring. Just as she knew that Thor was far away, lost forever in the Empire, in some place from which he would never return.

Tears rolled down Gwen's cheeks as she thought of him, of the life they could have had. Of how close they had once been. She pictured the look on his face, the sound of his voice, his

laughter. She had been so sure that everything would be irreparable between them, that they would never be torn apart, by anything.

“THOR!” Gwendolyn threw back her head and cried, swaying on the ledge. She willed for him to come back to her.

But her voice echoed on the wind, and faded away. Thor was a world away.

Gwendolyn reached down and held the amulet Thor had given her, the one that had saved her life once. She knew that her one chance had been used. Now, there were no more chances.

Gwendolyn looked down over the ledge, and she saw her father’s face. He was surrounded by white light, and he smiled at her.

She leaned forward and hung one foot over the edge, closing her eyes to the breeze. She hovered there, caught between two worlds, between the living and the dead. She was balanced perfectly, and she knew the next gust of wind would decide for her which direction she would go.

Thor, she thought. Forgive me.

*

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