

A GRANT OF ARMS

(BOOK #8 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.

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Morgan is also author of the #1 Bestselling epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising eight 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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THE SORCERER'S RING



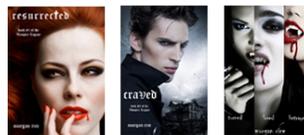
THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY



the vampire journals



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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN
CHAPTER TWELVE
CHAPTER THIRTEEN
CHAPTER FOURTEEN
CHAPTER FIFTEEN
CHAPTER SIXTEEN
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
CHAPTER NINETEEN
CHAPTER TWENTY
CHAPTER TWENTY ONE
CHAPTER TWENTY TWO
CHAPTER TWENTY THREE
CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR
CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE
CHAPTER TWENTY SIX
CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN
CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT
CHAPTER TWENTY NINE
CHAPTER THIRTY
CHAPTER THIRTY ONE
CHAPTER THIRTY TWO
CHAPTER THIRTY THREE
CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR
CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE
CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

“Mine honor is my life, both grow in one.
Take honor from me, and my life is done.”

--William Shakespeare
Richard II

CHAPTER ONE

Gwendolyn braced herself against the cold, whipping wind as she stood at the edge of the Canyon and took her first step onto the arched footbridge that spanned the Northern Crossing. This rickety bridge, covered in ice, was comprised of a worn wooden rope and planks, and hardly seemed capable of holding them. Gwen cringed as she took her first step.

Gwen slipped, and reached out and grabbed the railing, which swung and hardly helped. Her heart dropped to consider that this flimsy bridge was their only way to cross the northern side of the Canyon, to enter the Netherworld, and to find Argon. She looked up and saw, in the distance, the Netherworld beckoning, a sheet of blinding snow. The crossing felt even more ominous.

A sudden gale came, and the rope swayed so violently, Gwendolyn felt herself grabbing the rail with both hands and dropping to her knees. For a moment she did not know if she could even hang on—much less cross it. She realized this was far more dangerous than she had thought, and that they would all be taking their lives into their hands to try.

“My lady?” came the voice.

Gwen turned to see Aberthol standing a few feet away, beside Steffen, Alistair and Krohn, all of them waiting to follow. The five of them made an unlikely group, perched here on the edge of the world, facing an uncertain future and a probable death.

“Must we really attempt to cross this?” he asked.

Gwendolyn turned and looked back out at the whipping snow and wind before her, and clutched her furs tighter around her shoulders as she shivered. Secretly, she did not want to cross it; she did not want to take this journey at all. She would so much rather retreat to the safety of

her childhood home, King's Court, to sit behind its snug walls, before a fire, and contemplate none of the dangers and worries of the world that had engulfed her since she had become queen.

But of course, she could not do that. King's Court was no more; her childhood was gone; and she was Queen now. She had a baby-to-be to care for, a husband-to-be out there somewhere, and they needed her. For Thorgrin, she would walk through fire if that was needed. Gwen felt certain that it was indeed needed. They all needed Argon—not just her and Thor, but the entire Ring. They were up against not only Andronicus, but also a powerful magic, powerful enough to ensnare Thor, and without Argon, she did not know how they could possibly combat it.

“Yes,” she replied. “We must.”

Gwen prepared to take another step, and this time Steffen rushed forward, blocking her way.

“My lady, please allow me to go first,” he said. “We do not know what terrors await us on this bridge.”

Gwendolyn was touched by his offer, but reached up and gently pushed him aside.

“No,” she said. “I shall.”

She waited no longer, but stepped forward, grabbing firm hold of the rope rail.

As she took a step, she was struck by the freezing sensation in her hand, the ice digging into her, the cold sensation shooting up her palms and arms. She breathed sharply, unsure if she could even hang on.

Another gale of wind came, blowing the bridge side to side, forcing her to grab harder, to tolerate the pain of the ice. She struggled to balance with all she had, as her feet slipped on the ice-covered rope and planks beneath her. The bridge lurched sharply to the left, and for a moment she was sure she would fall over the side. The bridge corrected itself, and swayed back in the other direction.

Gwen knelt again. She had barely gone ten feet, and already her heart was pounding so hard she could barely breathe, and her hands were so numb she could hardly feel them.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, and she thought of Thor. She pictured his face, every angle of it. She dwelled on her love for him. Her determination to free him. Whatever it took.

Whatever it took.

Gwendolyn opened her eyes and forced herself to take several steps forward, clutching the railing, not willing to stop this time for anything. The wind and snow could drive her down into the depths of the Canyon. She no longer cared. It was no longer about her; it was about the love of her life. For him, she could do anything.

Gwendolyn felt the weight shift on the bridge behind her, and she glanced back to see Steffen, Aberthol, Alistair and Krohn following. Krohn slipped on his paws as he rushed past the others, weaving in and out until he was by Gwendolyn's side.

"I don't know if I can do this," Aberthol called out, his voice strained, after a few shaky steps.

He stood there, arms shaking as he clutched the rope, a feeble old man, barely able to hang on.

"You can do it," Alistair said, stepping up beside him and draping one arm around his waist. "I'm right here. Do not worry."

Alistair walked with him, helping him forward as the group resumed walking, heading farther and farther across the bridge, one step at a time.

Gwen once again marveled at Alistair's strength in the face of adversity, her calm nature, her fearlessness. She also exuded a power that Gwendolyn did not understand. Gwen could not

explain why she felt as close to her as she did, but in the short time she had known her, she already felt like a sister. She drew strength from her presence. And from Steffen's.

There came a lull in the wind, and they made good time. Soon they crossed the midpoint of the bridge, moving faster now, Gwen getting a hang of the slippery planks. The far side of the Canyon began to come into sight, only fifty yards away. Gwendolyn's heart began to well with optimism. They might make it after all.

A fresh gale whipped through, this one stronger than all the others, so strong that Gwen was forced to drop to her knees and clutch the rope with both hands. She held on for dear life as the bridge swung up nearly ninety degrees, then swung back down just as violently. She felt a plank give way beneath her feet, and she cried out as one of her legs sank down into the opening, through the bridge, her leg stuck up to her thigh. She wiggled, but could not get out.

Gwendolyn turned to watch Aberthol lose his grip, letting go of Alistair and beginning to slide over the edge of the bridge. Alistair reacted quickly, reaching out with one hand and clasping his wrist, holding him back just before Aberthol slipped over the edge.

Alistair leaned over the edge of the bridge, holding on, as Aberthol swung beneath her, nothing between him and the bottom of the Canyon. Alistair strained, and Gwen prayed the rope did not give. Gwen felt so helpless, stuck as she was, her leg lodged between the planks. Her heart pounded madly as she tried to get out.

The bridge swayed wildly, and Alistair and Aberthol swayed with it.

"Let go!" Aberthol screamed. "Save yourself!"

Aberthol's cane slipped from his hand and tumbled through the sky, end over end, down towards the depths of the Canyon. Now all he had left was the staff strapped to his back.

"You are going to be okay," Alistair said calmly.

Gwen looked over, surprised to see Alistair so poised, confident.

“Look into my eyes,” Alistair instructed, firmly.

“What?” Aberthol screamed out over the wind.

“Look into my eyes,” Alistair commanded, even more strength in her voice.

There was something about her tone that commanded men, and Aberthol looked up at her. Their eyes locked, and as they did, Gwendolyn watched a light glow emanate from Alistair’s eyes and shine down to Aberthol’s. She watched in disbelief as the glow enveloped Aberthol, and as Alistair leaned back and with one yank, pulled Aberthol back up, onto the bridge.

Aberthol, stunned, lay there, breathing hard, and looked up at Alistair in wonder; then he immediately turned and grabbed hold of the rope railing with both hands, before another gust of wind came.

“My lady!” Steffen yelled.

Gwen looked over to see him kneeling over her. He reached down, grabbed her shoulders, and yanked with all his might.

Gwen began to slowly dislodge from the planks, but as she came close to breaking free, she slipped from his icy grip and slipped back down to where she was, lodged even deeper. Suddenly, a second plank beneath Gwendolyn snapped, and she screamed as she felt herself begin to plummet.

Gwendolyn reached up and grabbed hold of the rope with one hand, and Steffen’s wrist with the other. She felt as if her shoulders were being torn from her sockets as she dangled in the open air. Steffen dangled now, too, leaning so far over the edge, his legs tangled up behind him, risking his life to keep her from falling, the breaking ropes behind him the only thing keeping them afloat.

There came a snarling and Krohn leapt forward and sunk his fangs into the fur on Gwen's coat and pulled back with all he had, snarling and whining.

Slowly, Gwen was hoisted, inch by inch, until finally she could grab hold of the planks on the bridge. She dragged herself up and lay there face first, spent, breathing hard.

Krohn licked her face again and again, and she breathed, so grateful for him, and for Steffen, who now lay beside her. She was so happy to be alive, to be saved from a horrible death.

But Gwendolyn suddenly heard a snapping noise, and felt the entire bridge quiver. Her blood ran cold as she turned and looked back: one of the ropes anchoring the bridge to the Canyon snapped off.

The entire bridge jerked, and Gwen watched in horror as the other one, hanging by a thread, snapped, too.

They all screamed as suddenly half of the entire bridge detached from the Canyon wall; the bridge swung them all so fast that Gwen could hardly breathe as they flew through the air, heading at light speed for the far side of the Canyon wall.

Gwen looked up and saw the rock wall coming at them in a blur, and she knew that in moments, they would all be dead from the impact, their bodies crushed, and that whatever survived of them would plummet down to the depths of the earth.

"Rock, give way, I COMMAND YOU!" shouted a voice filled with ancient primordial authority, a voice unlike any Gwen had ever heard.

She glanced over to see Alistair, clutching the rope, holding out one palm, fixated fearlessly on the cliff they were about to hit. From Alistair's palm there emanated a yellow light, and as they sped closer to the Canyon wall, as Gwendolyn braced herself for impact, she was shocked at what happened next.

Before her eyes, the solid rock face of the Canyon changed to snow—as they all impacted, Gwendolyn did not feel the crack of bones she had expected to. Instead, she felt her entire body immersed in a wall of light fluffy snow. It was freezing, and it covered her completely, entering her eyes and nose and ears—but it did not hurt her.

She was alive.

They all dangled there, the rope hanging from the top of the Canyon, immersed in the wall of snow, and Gwendolyn felt a strong hand grab her wrist. Alistair. Her hand was strangely warm, despite the freezing cold. Alistair had already somehow grabbed the others, too, and soon they were all, including Krohn, yanked up by her, as she climbed the rope as if it were nothing.

Finally, they reached the top, and Gwen collapsed on solid ground, on the far side of the Canyon. The second they did, the rope snapped, and what was left of the bridge plummeted down, hurling into the mist, into the depths of the Canyon.

Gwendolyn lay there, breathing hard, so grateful to be on solid ground again, wondering what just happened. The ground was freezing, covered in ice and snow, but nonetheless it was solid ground. She was off the bridge, and she was alive. They had made it. Thanks to Alistair.

Gwendolyn turned and looked over at Alistair with a new sense of wonder and respect. She was beyond grateful to have her by her side. She felt like the sister she'd never had, and Gwen had a feeling that she had not even begun to see the depth of Alistair's power.

Gwen had no idea how they would make it back to the mainland of the Ring when they were done here—*if* they were ever done, if they ever even found Argon and made it back. And as she peered into the wall of blinding snow ahead of her, the entry to the Netherworld, she had a sinking feeling that the hardest obstacles still lay before them.

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