

A CHARGE OF VALOR

(BOOK #6 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 six 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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“Cowards die many times before their deaths;
The valiant never taste of death but once.”

--William Shakespeare

Julius Caesar

CHAPTER ONE

Gwendolyn lay face down in the grass, feeling the cold winter breeze rush over her bare skin, and as her eyes fluttered open, slowly, distantly, the world came back into focus. She had been in some faraway place, in a field radiant with sunlight, flowers, Thor and her father by her side, all of them laughing and happy. Everything had been perfect in the world.

But now, as she peeled open her eyes, the world before her could not have been more different. The ground was hard, cold, and standing over her, slowly gaining his feet, was not her father, not Thor—but a monster: McCloud. Done with her, he slowly rose, buckled his pants, and gazed down with a satisfied look.

In a rush, it all came back to her. Her surrender to Andronicus. His betrayal. Her being attacked by McCloud. Her cheeks flushed red as she realized how naive she had been.

She lay there, her whole body hurting, her heart breaking, and more than any time in her life, she wanted to die.

Gwendolyn opened her eyes further and saw Andronicus' army, scores of soldiers, all watching the scene, and her shame deepened. She should have never surrendered to this creature; she wished, instead, she had gone down fighting. She should have listened to Kendrick and the others. Andronicus had played to her sacrificial instincts, and she had fallen for it. She wished she would have met him in battle: even if she had died, at least then she could have gone down with her dignity, her honor, intact.

Gwendolyn knew with certainty, for the first time in her life, that she was about to die. But somehow, that no longer bothered her. She no longer cared about dying—she just cared about dying *her* way—and she wasn't ready to go down yet.

As she lay there, face down, Gwendolyn furtively reached out and grasped a clump of dirt in one hand.

“You can get up now, woman,” McCloud ordered gruffly. “I'm through with you. It's time for others to have a turn.”

Gwen clutched the dirt so hard her knuckles turned white, and she prayed that this worked.

In one quick motion she spun around and threw the clump of dirt into McCloud's eyes.

He had not expected it, and he screamed and stumbled back, raising his hands to try to pull the dirt out of his eyes.

Gwen took advantage of the moment. Raised in King's Castle, she had been reared by the King's warriors, and they had always taught her to attack a second time, before your enemy had a chance to recover. They had also taught her a lesson she had never forgotten: whether she carried a weapon or not, she was always armed. She could always use the enemy's weapon.

Gwen reached over, extracted the dagger from McCloud's belt, raised it high, and plunged it between his legs.

McCloud shrieked even louder, removing his hands from his eyes and grabbing his groin. Blood flowed between his legs, as he reached down and pulled out the dagger, gasping.

She was thrilled with herself for landing the blow, for getting at least this small revenge. But to her surprise, the blow, which would have downed anyone else, did not stop him. This monster was unstoppable. She had wounded him badly, right where he deserved it, but had not killed him. It had not even made him sink to his knees.

Instead, McCloud extracted the dagger, dripping with blood, and sneered down at her with a look of death. He began to descend for her, clutching the dagger with shaking hands, and Gwendolyn knew her time had come. At least she would die with some small satisfaction.

“Now I’m going to carve out your heart and feed it to you,” he said. “Prepare to learn what real pain means.”

Gwendolyn braced herself for the dagger plunge, prepared to meet a painful death.

A scream rang out, and after a shocked moment, Gwendolyn was surprised to realize that the scream was not her own. It was McCloud; he was shrieking in agony.

Gwen lowered her hands and looked up, confused. McCloud had dropped the dagger. She blinked several times, trying to understand the sight before her.

McCloud stood there with an arrow lodged in his eye. He shrieked, blood pouring from his eye, as he raised a hand and grabbed at the arrow. She could not understand. He had been shot. But how? By whom?

Gwen turned in the direction from which the arrow had sailed, and her heart soared to see Steffen, standing there, holding a bow, hiding amidst a huge group of soldiers. Before anyone else could figure out what was going on, Steffen fired off six more arrows, and one by one, the six soldiers standing beside McCloud fell, arrows piercing through all of their throats.

Steffen reached back to fire more, but he was finally spotted and pounced on by a large group of soldiers, who subdued him and pummeled him down to the ground.

McCloud, still shrieking, turned and ran off into the crowd. Amazingly, he was still not dead. She hoped that he would bleed to death.

Gwen's heart soared with gratitude for Steffen, more than he would ever know. She knew she would die here today by someone else's hand, but at least now it would not be by McCloud's.

The camp of soldiers quieted as Andronicus arose and marched slowly towards Gwendolyn. She lay there and watched him approach, impossibly tall, like a mountain moving her way. Soldiers fell in behind him as he came closer, the battlefield deathly silent, the only sound that of the whipping wind.

Andronicus stopped a few feet away, looming over her, looking down, expressionless. He reached up and slowly fingered the shrunken heads on his necklace, and an odd sound came from the bowels of his chest and throat, like a purring noise. He seemed to be both angry and intrigued at the same time.

"You have defied the great Andronicus," he said slowly, the entire camp listening to his every word, ancient and deep. His voice boomed with authority and resonated across the plains. "It would have been easier if you had submitted to your punishment. Now you will have to learn what real pain means."

Andronicus reached down and drew a sword longer than Gwen had ever seen. It must have been eight feet long, and its distinctive ring echoed across the battlefield. He held it high, turning it in the light, the reflection so strong that it blinded her. He examined it himself as he twisted it in his hands, as if seeing it for the first time.

"You are a woman of noble birth," he said. "It suits you that you should die by a noble sword."

Andronicus took two steps forward, grabbed the hilt with both hands, and raised the sword higher.

Gwendolyn closed her eyes. She heard the whistling of the wind, the movement of every blade of grass, and there came flashing through her mind random memories from her life. She felt the completion of her life, felt everything she had done, everyone she had loved. In her final thoughts, Gwen thought of Thor. She reached down to her neck and clasped the amulet he had given her, held it tight in her fist. She could feel the warm power radiating through it, this ancient red stone, and she remembered Thor's words as he had given it to her: this amulet can save your life. Once.

She clutched the amulet tighter, throbbing in her palm, and she prayed to God with every fiber of her being.

Please God, let this amulet work. Please, save me, just this one time. Let me see Thor again.

Gwendolyn opened her eyes, expecting to see Andronicus's sword flashing down at her—yet what she saw surprised her. Andronicus stood there, frozen, looking over her shoulder, as if watching someone approach. He appeared to be surprised; even confused, and it was not an expression which she had ever expected to see him wear.

“You will lower your weapon now,” a voice rang out behind Gwendolyn.

Gwendolyn was electrified at the sound of that voice. It was a voice she knew. She spun, and she was shocked to see standing there a person who she knew as well as her own father.

Argon.

There he stood, dressed in his white robes and hood, his eyes shining with an intensity greater than she had ever seen, staring right at Andronicus. She and Steffen lay on the ground between these two titans. They were two creatures of incredible force, one of the darkness, and one of the light, standing off against each other. She could almost feel the spiritual war raging above her head.

“Will I?” Andronicus mocked, smiling back.

But in Andronicus’ smile, Gwen could see his lips tremble, could see, for the first time, something like fear in Andronicus’ eyes. She had never thought she would see that. Andronicus must have known of Argon. And whatever it was he knew, it was enough to make the most powerful man in the world afraid.

“You will harm the girl no further,” Argon said calmly. “You will accept her surrender,” he said, taking a step closer, his eyes shining, hypnotizing. “You will allow her to retreat to her people. And you will allow her people to surrender, if they choose. I will only tell you this one time. You would be wise to accept it.”

Andronicus stared back at Argon and blinked several times, as if undecided.

Then finally, he leaned back his head and roared with laughter. It was the loudest and darkest laughter Gwen had ever heard, filling the entire camp, seeming to reach up to the very sky.

“Your sorcerer’s tricks won’t work on me, old man,” Andronicus said. “I know of the Great Argon. There was a time when you were powerful. More powerful than man, than dragons, than the sky itself, or so they say. But your time has passed. Now it is a new time. Now it is a time for the great Andronicus. Now, you are but a relic, a remnant of some other time, when the MacGils ruled, when magic was strong. When the Ring was indefensible. But your fate is tied to the Ring. And now the Ring is weak. Like you.

“You are a fool to confront me, old man. Now you will suffer. Now you will learn the strength of the Great Andronicus.”

Andronicus sneered and raised his sword again, towards Gwendolyn, this time looking right at Argon.

“I’m going to kill the girl slowly, before your eyes,” Andronicus said. “Then I will kill the hunchback. Next, I will maim you, but leave you alive as a walking symbol of the power of my greatness.”

Gwendolyn braced herself and flinched as Andronicus brought the sword down for her head.

Suddenly, something happened. She heard a sound cut through the air, like that of a thousand fires, followed by Andronicus’ scream.

She opened her eyes in utter disbelief to see Andronicus’ face contorted in pain, dropping his sword and kneeling to the ground. She watched Argon take a step forward, then another, holding out a single palm, which was radiating a ball of violet light. The ball grew larger and larger, enveloping Andronicus as Argon continued walking forward, expressionless, getting closer and closer to Andronicus as he held out his palm.

Andronicus curled up into a ball on the ground, as the light enveloped him.

A gasp erupted from his men, but none dared approach. Either they were afraid, or Argon had cast some sort of spell to make them powerless.

“MAKE IT STOP!” Andronicus screamed, reaching up and grabbing his ears. “I BEG YOU!”

“You will do no further harm to the girl,” Argon said slowly.

“I will do no further harm to the girl!” Andronicus repeated, as if in a trance.

“You will release her now and allow her to return to her people.”

“I will release her now and allow her to return to her people!”

“You will give her people a chance to surrender.”

“I will give her people a chance to surrender!” Andronicus shrieked. “Please! I will do anything!”

Argon breathed deep, then finally stopped. The light disappeared from his hand, as he slowly lowered his arm.

Gwen looked up at him in shock; she had never seen Argon in action, and she could hardly comprehend his power. It was like watching the heavens open up.

“If we meet again, great Andronicus,” Argon said slowly, looking down as Andronicus lay there whimpering, “it will be on your way to the darkest realms of death.”

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