

# Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (14 page)

No news on her missing dog. Not a word, not a sign, not a whisper.

*It's like Rhyswr never existed.*

Morgan sighed as she

contemplated the black mastiff's picture on the bulletin board in the clinic waiting room. Sadly, she was beginning to believe that Rhyswr had somehow returned to whoever owned him.

Her partner Jay locked the front door and turned the plastic sign to Closed. "Have you noticed that this is exactly the reverse of what we were doing before?" he asked. "We did all that work to try to find the owner in the first place. Now you're the owner, and we're trying to find the dog. And both times, there's no clue, nothing. I'm wondering if maybe there's nothing to find."

"That's a strange thing to say."

"It's a strange situation, don't you think? He's too damn big to lose. He could have stepped through a portal for all we know. Or maybe he was a ghost all along."

"Jesus, Jay!"

"No, really. Maybe it's crazy, but I'm thinking something unnatural's going on here. It's spooky, like

*The Hound of the Baskervilles*

or some damn thing."

"Well, he sure bled a lot for a ghost dog. And he ate half a bag of dog food in one sitting."

"So he assumed corporeal form when he entered this dimension. You know that collar that fell off?"

Morgan resisted rolling her eyes. Maybe Jay was just joking around, perhaps trying to cheer her up in some bizarre male fashion. "It's in a box in my office—I was thinking of getting it repaired and I just haven't had time. What about it?"

"I borrowed this chunk of it, the part with the animal on it, and took it to a friend of mine at the university, Zak Talman." He pulled the gleaming segment from his pocket. The links hanging from it tinkled lightly as he put it into her hand. "Zak's a major expert in metallurgy, and he says it's old."

"What, like an antique or something?"

"Not just antique but  
*ancient*

. Around two thousand years ancient. This little blue animal is a hunting hound. It looks Celtic, although no one's ever seen this particular design. The inlaid stone is azurite. But it's the metal that's really amazing. It has no business being in this condition—it should be black with tarnish, pitted, corroded, something. And get this, Zak's never seen anything like the silver it's made from. He even ran tests to verify it."

"Silver's not rare, it's not even very expensive. Most of my jewelry is silver."

"Yeah, but it's not this pure. Most jewelry is 0.925—it means it's 92.5 percent silver, alloyed with other substances to give it strength. Bullion silver for trading is 99.9 percent, but it's so soft, you can't make anything durable out of it. It bends, dents, warps.

"This collar is 100 percent silver, Morgan. One hundred percent. It's not supposed to be physically possible to produce it, but the real kicker is that it's also strong. Really strong. Something in the way it's been created, worked, forged, I don't know. Zak says there's no process today that can duplicate it."

"If it's all that strong, then why did it break? I'm telling you, Jay, it just fell on the floor and shattered like glass."

"We can't duplicate that either." Jay pointed to the coils that surrounded the piece. "We experimented on this little partial link on the end right here. Nothing Zak had in the lab would touch it. Not a damn thing. Not a chemical, not even a hammer and chisel."

She couldn't think of a thing to say to that, could only stare at the wonder in her hands. What was it Rhys had said?

*Forged in faery fire, crafted by faery hand.*

"Look, this is where I have to apologize to you. I didn't know the collar was valuable, or I'd have never taken a piece of it out of your office," Jay continued. "I'm really sorry for that. The good part is that I didn't tell Zak who you were, or where you found it, or even that there's more of it than just the piece I showed him."

"Why? Are you worried about something?"

"Let's just say I'm concerned enough to suggest you lock up the collar somewhere for safekeeping until you figure out what you want to do with it. Thank all the stars, Zak is an honest guy and gave the piece back to me, although I'm sure he cried himself to sleep last night. He'd like nothing better than to do more tests and bring in experts, because if this thing is real, it would be the find of a lifetime. A lot of museums and collectors would pay a fortune to have a single link of this collar, Morgan. I think you have enough in this box to ransom Bill Gates."

Her legs felt wobbly, and she plunked into a chair. "Omigod," she managed and looked up at her partner. "How? How did something so rare and valuable end up around a dog's neck?"

"No idea. That's why I think there's something weird going on. As in otherworldly. Paranormal. Supernatural. Hell, maybe even extraterrestrial."

“Jay!”

“Come on, Morgan. That guy, what’s his name,  
*Reese*

, just happens to show up exactly when the dog disappears? With a tattoo matching the dog’s collar? That’s not a coincidence.”

“No, but I’m sure there’s an explanation.”

“Yeah, like maybe he was telling you the truth.”

“No way. Not possible.” Morgan was on her feet then, waving a hand in front of her emphatically. “Look, I’ve been thinking about what the guy said, and I think he’s involved in a role-playing game. It’s probably a club or something that’s adopted the blue hound logo. Somebody in the group owned the dog, and that’s why the dog was wearing the collar, why it had the same symbol as the guy. And whoever dumped the guy on my property took the dog. Everything can be explained, Jay.”

He folded his arms and shook his head. “You’d like it to be, but it can’t. For one thing, my wife and I play those kinds of games. We belong to one of those clubs, and if there was a group like this, we’d hear about it. And nothing,

*nothing*

explains the collar. I told you, silver that’s 100 percent pure and stronger than titanium is not possible according to any physics that we know of.”

“Then your friend Zak must have made a mistake.”

“Why, because what he discovered doesn’t fit into a category you can believe in?”

“Come on, Jay, think about what you’re asking me to believe. Both of us have studied biology, chemistry, natural sciences. We practice them every day. We have to deal with reality, not fantasy.”

“I’ll bet they said the same thing to Newton and Einstein. Look, what is fantasy but science we haven’t discovered yet? Right this minute, they’re figuring out how to prove that there are more than three or four dimensions, that maybe there are a dozen. That used to be science fiction, Morgan. How could they have even imagined that without being open to possibilities?”

It gave her pause. Nainie Jones had talked of not just being openhearted but being open-minded more than once. “But isn’t there such a thing as being too open?” she asked. “Can a person be too willing to discard the rational in favor of the fantastic?”

“I don’t think you have to choose between them. I mean, why is it always either/or? Can’t both exist at the same time? The known and the unknown?”

“And you think this is a case of the unknown?”

Jay held her gaze and nodded solemnly. “You can laugh at me if you want to, Morgan, but I’m thinking that the collar does not fit in the natural world as we know it. And that means your dog and your naked guy don’t either.”

“Good to know. Especially now that

*my*

naked guy—” she made quotation marks in the air with her fingers “—is living at my farm as we speak. Should I worry about being dragged into the Twilight Zone?”

“Too late for that,” said Jay. “I think we’re already there.”

## TEN

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nough for now, cariad. Rhys finished leading Lucy in a long, slow circle around the grassy field north of what Morgan had called the

*machine shed*

. The fallow ground was little more than an overgrown pasture, but it was a good place to exercise the injured mare. The soft earth was much less jarring to her wounds than the hard-packed corral over by the barn. “Time to go back and rest.”

It felt good to be around a horse again. To be in this place, close to the land again. He hadn’t always been a warrior. Men must eat, and it would be foolish to know only the skills of war. When peace returned, what then? It was said in his clan that a man must have a bow in one hand and a plow in the other. He had ridden a horse since he was able to stand, practiced daily with sword and bow, but he had helped his father and older brothers in the fields too. He’d learned to plant all manner of crops, aid the birth of foals, trade cattle.

True, this was a different time and a different country. He had seen farming practices change and develop over the centuries, but Rhys remained confident. What he didn’t know, he could learn.

*Would*

learn. For Morgan, certainly, but also for himself. Why, a man could—

Without warning, Lucy balked, planting her feet and refusing to move forward.

“Come along now.” Rhys made soothing sounds at the big gray mare. “True it is that it’s a fine day, but you’re not healed enough yet to be walking o’er much.” Instead of obeying, however, she flared her nostrils and threw her head, yanking back on the lead rope and even showing the whites of her eyes.

He didn’t urge her forward again. Many a warrior had been saved by heeding his mount’s warning. Horses could hear sounds too soft and too high for human ears, and Lucy was too steady a beast to start at nothing. Rhys stood where he was and carefully studied their surroundings for something, anything, out of place.

The September afternoon was warm and still, a pleasant remnant of late summer. Yet there was no birdsong and even the insects had gone silent. There were no bees laboring in the nearby clover. No sound at all except for the quivering breath of the horse beside him. Then Rhys frowned at a large patch of tall grass just ahead.

How was it managing to wave without a breeze?

The stems appeared to be disturbed from underneath the soil. A burrowing creature, a mole perhaps, might move a few blades of grass as it moved through the earth. But the area affected was much wider than Rhys was tall. Suddenly a great mound of sod began to rise slowly like yeasted bread until it tore away from its surroundings. Clods of dirt rolled off the quivering earthen sides as

*something*

heaved itself upward. An icy calm settled over Rhys, as it always had when it was his turn in the arena.

Thanking the gods that Morgan was yet at the clinic, he took firm hold of Lucy's halter. He had no time to see her safely to her stall. Instead he turned her away and led her as quickly as he

dared into the shade of the machine shed where she couldn't see whatever happened.

Tying her lead rope to a post, he prayed for the sake of her wounds that she wouldn't break loose and run.

He needed a weapon. Rhys eyed the tools that hung in the shed and quickly settled on a long-handled spade. He hefted the thick hardwood shaft in his hands—oak, he hoped—and approved of the pointed steel blade at one end. It was old, but heavy and solid. He would have preferred a sword or even a Roman trident, a

*fascina*

, but in the ring as in battle, one learned to use whatever came to hand. Armed, Rhys headed out to face whatever was invading the farm.

The mound, now chest high, had split along its base on the side facing him, like a long, gaping mouth with snagged roots for teeth. The darkness within seemed blacker than shadow ought to be on a bright afternoon—and a pair of eyes flashed in the depths, many handspans apart. Rhys allowed himself a quick glance at the house, reassuring himself that no one was home, and braced to meet the unseen enemy.

A handlike appendage reached from the darkness, the flesh pale like something long buried as it grasped at the dirt with four long, thick fingers. It hesitated as if testing the strength of the sun—and suddenly the moist white skin flushed a deep and mottled brown. Nostrils flared on the sides of the blunt nose that followed. The flat, arrow-shaped head was as wide as a wheelbarrow and swiftly became the color of the earth as well, as it emerged from the gaping crevice. Silvery eyes the size of apples flashed in the daylight but didn't flinch or blink.

*Blind but far from harmless*

, thought Rhys, as the creature's mouth opened to reveal double rows of conical teeth, some longer than a spearhead. He'd seen these monstrous salamanders before. It was a

*bwgan*

, a creature from the darker side of the faery realm. Like the faeries themselves,

*bwganod*

lived almost forever.

Unlike the fae, they relished the taste of human flesh—and the creature turned its great head in Rhys's direction, tracking his location by smell.

Rhys took the offensive immediately, not waiting for the rest of the beast to emerge from the darkness. He ran forward and leapt over the bwgan's head, stabbing downward as he passed with the spade as if using a spear. He'd hoped for a killing blow between the eyes, but the big creature was fast and the skull was solid. Still, the spade slid along the bone and sheared off a portion of the bloated face, taking one of the eyes with it. The roaring hiss that followed was like water on a blacksmith's forge as the salamander writhed, its dagger teeth spitting droplets of amber venom in all directions as dark, bluish blood poured from the wound. Rhys jumped just in time to avoid being hit by the long, swollen tail, the color of a drowned corpse. The tail didn't turn brown in the light as other parts had previously. Perhaps the creature was weakened? Rhys searched for an opening and—