

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (27 page)

“There’s malice aplenty from some,” agreed Rhys. “But you can guard yourself against malice. Most of the Tylwyth Teg are *indifferent* and that’s worse. That’s what makes them so dangerous.”

Ranyon put his Jays cap on backward and sighed. “Aye. And bloody unpredictable.”

“C’mon, isn’t there somebody in charge?” Leo demanded. “I thought there was supposed to be some kind of ruler, like in the bedtime stories my mother told me.”

“Oh, aye. The queen has done her very best to keep things fair and peaceful, but when the old king died, much of her influence died with him. Now most of the Tylwyth Teg do what they like and hang the rest,” said the elyll.

“The king *died* ? You just told me that faeries live forever.”

“Being immortal doesn’t mean they can’t be killed,” said Rhys.

Ranyon folded his spindly arms. “Remember my clan who perished. So, aye, even the king of the Tylwyth Teg was slain. There was treachery behind it, a play for the throne, and the queen narrowly held her power. But hold it she did, for all the good it’s done her. No one dares to challenge her openly, but many work behind her back. And so no one is safe, not human nor fae.”

“It’s just not right,” declared Leo and reset his baseball cap on his head as if to emphasize the point. “It’s not right at all. No one’s unimportant. *No one.*”

Ranyon patted his friend’s arm. “Aye, not when they’re around Leo Waterson, they’re not.”

Rhys heartily agreed, but inside he was disquieted. *No one is safe, not human nor fae.*

The bleak conversation had served to remind him that the Tylwyth Teg were probably far from finished with him. So far, they’d sent a spy and an assassin. What would be next?

After the jousting finished—with Brandan and Boo claiming the title—the remaining events involved humans only. Morgan was free to wander the makeshift streets of the fair, taking in the many displays and demonstrations. It felt strange not to rush back to

the clinic, but Grady and Tyler no doubt had the place under control. In fact, Jay and Grady had both

insisted

that Morgan take a few days off after she finished with today's events.

For once, she hadn't argued. After all, she hadn't slept well since her falling-out with Rhys. Most nights she was too miserable to nod off for very long, and when she did, the results were astonishing. She was

still

experiencing blatantly sexy dreams, and they all revolved around Rhys. Was the man an addiction? And, of course, it only added to the difficulty of getting over him.

Part of her was no longer certain that was possible...

She passed a booth with charming felted hats that had a mirror angled in her direction.

Good grief.

It was obvious that all the cover stick in the world could no longer hide the shadows under her eyes—no wonder her partners had told her to take time off.

Maybe some time to herself was just what she needed.

A little rest, a little relaxation, a little recreation

...Morgan imagined that a trip to a shopping mall would have been more therapeutic than an event where Rhys was impossible to avoid. But, as she lectured herself inwardly, she loved the fair and she attended every year. Even if she had hated it, she would have come for the sake of supporting her friends.

No way

was she going to be chased off because Mr. Celtic Warrior was walking around looking better than Brad Pitt on his best day.

She lingered at a booth that was selling handwoven baskets, then watched a woman creating an intricately patterned fabric on an enormous loom. Morgan's stomach reminded her that she'd skipped lunch, so she bought a small chicken pie from a busker carrying a tray of them on his head. The tender pastry was redolent of rosemary, and she savored it to the last crumb as she walked.

It was easy for her to spot her friends here and there in the crowd (and avoid Rhys). They'd elected to adopt a simple costume, dressing all in black with blue tabards—simple sleeveless tunics—that were strikingly edged in white. Jay had originally wanted red, Mike and Brandan had both voted for gold, but all were quick to go with Rhys's suggestion of blue. They'd been enthusiastic too about Starr's suggestion for the group's logo—a Celtic hound in the center of the tabard, front and back, and also on the shields they carried. Starr did all the sewing and needlework, and when she was finished, the hound was the spitting image of the tattoo on Rhys's collarbone and the inlaid design on Rhys's broken collar.

The symbol had disturbed Morgan at first—okay, it still disturbed her

plenty

since Rhys hadn't renounced his claim of being an ancient Celt—but there was no denying it was a beautiful

design. Morgan made a point of stopping by Starr's booth to compliment her on her craftsmanship.

"I'm really happy with how well it turned out," Starr said as she and another woman worked the booth, taking money, making change, and answering customer questions about the handmade jewelry and herbal remedies on display. "Rhys took his shirt off and let me trace his tattoo, and then I just enlarged the design."

The thought of Starr's hands on Rhys's bare chest gave Morgan a rude jolt. She didn't know which bothered her more: that someone else had touched Rhys's skin or that she personally gave a damn. Starr had done nothing wrong, of course.

How long before I quit caring about the guy?

Morgan asked herself and then was sorry she'd done so.

Yanking her thoughts away from the touchy subject, she turned her attention to the many crystals and handmade jewelry displayed beside neatly labeled jars and packets of healing plants. On impulse, she drew Nainie's necklace from her purse—she hadn't dared wear it while she was working in case it got damaged or dirty, but she seemed to feel better if it was with her—and showed Starr the medallion. "I was wondering if you could tell me what this is made of."

"Omigosh." Her friend looked startled, then recovered herself. "It's *gorgeous*

, Morgan! Just look at all the colors in it. And the pattern seems Celtic." Starr touched a finger to the dark stone pendant, then drew back. "Holy cow, it's powerful too—you can really feel the positive energy coming off it. Where did you find this? Who made this?"

"I don't know. Someone in Wales, I imagine. Nainie left it to me." Morgan didn't feel any energy radiating from it herself, just knew that she felt good when she held the necklace. But if

there

were

such a thing as good energy associated with it, it had surely come from her grandmother. "I know what some of the surrounding stones are, but this big one—I can't find any information on it."

Starr shook her head, making the tiny bells in her long braids sing out. The carved stone seemed to brighten for a split second, the light playing off hidden depths, but Morgan blinked and the effect was gone.

"It's incredibly beautiful, but honestly, I don't know what it is," said Starr. "Vanessa? Have you ever seen a stone like this?" Her partner came over to look at the pendant.

"It's a bit like labradorite, just the way it's got depth and fire to it. Almost a cross between a black opal and a pearl." The woman shook her head. "But you don't carve pearls or opals, and you certainly don't facet them, so I can't even hazard a guess. Lovely, though." She left to help an elderly woman choose a large piece of rose quartz from a display.

"Your event's been announced, Starr," called someone from the crowd.

“Thanks, Norrie. I’ll be right there.” Starr ran a finger over the pendant once more and shivered. “Amazing. Just *amazing*

. I’ll try looking it up in some of my books at home,” she said to Morgan. “Even the setting and the chain are a wonder—it looks just like something the elves would make in one of Tolkien’s books.”

Morgan thanked her and tucked the necklace back in her bag as Starr bounced away. If anyone could find out what the stone was, she knew that her friend could. But Morgan wished she hadn’t mentioned elves—they were way too much like faeries, and Morgan had had more than enough of

that
subject.

She dodged a trio of stilt walkers, tossed coins in a minstrel’s bowl, and joined Leo in the stands to watch the rest of the events. He had a spot open on either side of him, and she headed for the one on his left, but he put his hand up. “Best to sit on the other side,” he said. “Um, my right ear’s the good one, you know.”

“Sure,” she said, although she didn’t remember him ever mentioning having trouble with his hearing before. She sat on his right. “Wow, it feels good to get off my feet.”

“I’ve done enough walking for one day too,” he said. “And way more than enough eating. After I finished an apple dumpling and a custard tart, I told Rhys he’d have to save himself—it was too late for me. I’m staying right here till the fat lady sings. And I just might sing with her.” Chuckling, he patted his waistline.

“I hear you,” she laughed. “Either medieval people were very active or they were all very round. I just had a little chicken pie that’ll keep me full till next week. I’m sure there was real cream in it. Everything seems really rich.”

“Oh, everything
is

rich, believe me. One of the cooks was telling me they use authentic ingredients from medieval times—lard, suet, pork fat, all that good stuff.”

Morgan made a face. “I’m not sure I wanted to know that,” she said.

“My wife, Tina, would certainly have had a conniption and lectured me on my cholesterol and all that.” Leo leaned forward with a conspiratorial whisper. “But I have to admit, it tasted pretty damn good.”

They laughed and enjoyed the events. Starr won the women’s archery competition handily with a small recurve bow that packed a lot of power despite its delicate appearance.

Just like Starr herself
, thought Morgan.

Jay seemed to surprise himself by placing third in dagger throwing. Rhys had helped him with his technique at the farm, and Morgan had marveled at the strange little knives—they were all metal, the handles being simply blunt extensions of the blades

themselves. For balance, Jay had said. She jumped up and cheered loudly when he took second in throwing hatchets. The targets were metal shields and the armor-piercing capability of the small axes was amply demonstrated. It was a little chilling to think of that, but she was excited for her friend and partner just the same.

Mike, Brandan, and Rhys were all entered in the longbow event. Morgan had been trying to ignore Rhys's existence all day, and the fact that he looked good no matter what he was doing didn't help a bit. Nor did the appreciative comments she overheard from the women seated around her in the stands. And especially not the tittering remarks between some of them as to what else might be

long

about the tall, dark warrior besides his bow. Still, Morgan wanted to be supportive of the team, so she wasn't going to miss the event. Leo seemed to be glad she was there, and she had to admit, the old man's enthusiasm was contagious even in her present state of mind.

The ten contestants had drawn numbers to determine their order. Mike was up third and sent three arrows into the straw targets at the end of the field. Two were in the bull's-eye, which put him in first place. Brandan only got one in the center of the target, but he seemed happy with that. Rhys had coached both of them, and they'd improved a lot in the past few weeks. Rhys was last on the roster, and for a moment Morgan considered not watching—but decided that was just too high school. Besides, Leo was intent on sharing the moment.

"Look at that form," he said, patting her arm. "Our boy is rock steady. Do you know how much power it takes to draw a bow like that? It's six feet tall!"

Morgan had no idea, but even from here she could see Rhys's muscles bulge. He didn't draw the wooden bow as much as lean into it, and the great bow yielded accordingly. Three arrows were nocked and sent into the bull's-eye in quick succession.

"He's in first place now," declared Leo. "Let's see if he can stay there."

The next phase involved setting the targets farther back. Mike, Brandan, and Rhys retained their places through three more rounds, although Morgan imagined their arms must be feeling like spaghetti. During the last round, she could see the shine of sweat on Mike's face as he sought to hit a target that was now a daunting two hundred yards away, agreed to be the maximum possible range of an English longbow. All three of his arrows stuck—but not in the bull's-eye. Brandan managed to get two lodged in the outer rings. The other competitors achieved one at the most. All other arrows missed entirely.

It was Rhys's turn, and Morgan found herself holding her breath. It didn't matter that she was at odds with this man, didn't matter if he believed himself a Celtic warrior or a dancing bear. All that mattered in that moment was that there was dead silence in the arena and that every eye was on him as he drew the enormous bow, bending it nearly in half with the effort. The arrow loosed and a great roar went up from the crowd as it not only struck the target but grazed the bull's-eye. The second and third arrows were within the ring surrounding it.

“He’s done it!” shouted Leo, but he was all but drowned out in the roar of the crowd. Morgan stood and clapped until her hands were sore. Brandan and Mike slapped Rhys on the back and punched him in the shoulders. Their other teammates emerged from the onlookers and mobbed him, throwing pitchers of beer over him, bouncing their chests against him, and rubbing his head until his hair stood up.

Like watching the winning touch-down in a football game
, thought Morgan.