

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (28 page)

"This puts the whole team in first place now," Leo explained, as things settled down and they took their seats again.

Rhys and Mike dominated the next few events as well, all with various combinations of swordplay. Brandan, Jay, and the others stood on the sidelines and cheered them on. Morgan was just thankful that the blades were either padded or were substituted with thick rattan staves. Even then, one contestant was knocked out cold and another had an injured arm, probably broken.

"Holy crap, are they *trying* to kill each other?"

"Brandan told me that they don't hold back. Everyone who participates signs a waiver," explained Leo. "Of course, nobody enters unless they're gonna give it their all."

It has to be a guy thing.
Morgan shrugged.

Starr came and squeezed in beside her. "Vanessa's got the booth. I promised Jay I'd watch the heavy combat. This is the first year they're putting on a Capture the Castle event," she said. "It took them three weeks to build that castle facade. One of the board members is an engineer, and he designed it to withstand an army. Literally."

"I've got twenty dollars that says Rhys's team will come out on top," said Leo.

Both Starr and Morgan rolled their eyes. "No way am I taking a bet like that!" said Starr. "You'll have to find someone who hasn't watched them practice. The guys have been at the farm almost every night for the past two weeks."

"I'm surprised they're still talking to Rhys," said Morgan. "He's really pushed them hard."

Leo nodded. "He'd have made a great drill sergeant, that's certain. Puts me in mind of the one that made my life hell when I signed up."

"Well, at least he doesn't call them names," said Starr, passing out bottles of cold water from her big straw tote.

"Shit, he doesn't *have* to insult them to motivate them," snorted Leo. "Every one of them wants to *be* him when they grow up."

"I know Jay does," said Starr, rolling her eyes. "It's all he talks about at home."

“He talks about Rhys at work too,” said Morgan. What she didn’t say was how much she wished Jay *wouldn’t*

, at least not lately. She turned her attention to the field where the contestants were gathering. It certainly promised to be a colorful spectacle, with many of the dozen or so teams striving to accurately portray a particular era—or in some cases, a particular movie.

“

The Lord of the Rings

has plenty of fans by the looks of things,” said Morgan.

Starr nodded. “In order to get enough people, the board decided not to restrict the event to specific historical periods. It’s just for fun, really, although there are strict rules for safety.”

“Huh. You can’t keep that many people totally safe even if you arm them all with feathers,” said Leo, as he scanned the teams. So far, they were assembled into fairly tidy groups across the field from a great wooden castle—but there were a lot of them.

“Well, the weapons aren’t feathers, but they’re not steel either. Not for this. They have to be bamboo or rattan. And all vital parts of the body have to be shielded with armor of some kind.”

“I don’t see much armor on our team,” said Morgan. “Most of them seem to just have helmets.”

“It’s a rule that all helmets have to be steel. Body armor doesn’t have to be,” explained Starr. “Our team is wearing chain mail. But under

that

, Jay’s got carpet duct-taped around his shins and a Kevlar vest. Some of the guys are using hockey gear under their mail.” She pointed. “Brandan and Mike are the only ones who own real armor. It’s really expensive.”

Morgan could see that Mike’s exquisite helmet matched his hand-tooled steel suit. He looked like Lancelot from a King Arthur movie, and she wondered how he moved. Or saw anything. Or even breathed comfortably. A few others in the crowd sported full body armor too, and much of it was very ornate. Many of the participants—including Jay’s group—wore very plain helms with a brim and a cage protecting the face. In fact, Morgan thought their team looked outstanding with their blue-and-white hound tabards over their chain mail—and thankfully, they were easy for her to spot in the midst of the crowded field.

A tall figure in blue was standing apart from the others. The wind stirred his dark hair and stirred Morgan’s memories at the same time. She’d run her hands through that hair, clutched at it in her ecstasy, nuzzled it in affection—

As if aware of her, Rhys raised his head and met her gaze across the distance. She couldn’t see his expression, but she could *feel*

him. Then he jammed his helmet on with both hands and turned to the others as loud trumpets blared.

The battle was on.

EIGHTEEN

T

he teams had formed alliances in advance, but if there had been strategy in the beginning, it quickly degenerated into a free-for-all. Combatants engaged one another with rattan swords and maces, and Morgan winced at the sounds of impact. The weapons might not kill anyone, but surely the blows had to hurt.

“There’ll be plenty of bruises and bruised egos at the end of this war,” Starr said. “I don’t know why Jay always wants me to watch this violence. He knows I don’t enjoy it.”

“He just wants you to see him being manly.” Leo laughed.

Morgan grinned. Her attention was then caught and held by a powerful man who was systematically clearing a path through the fighters. It was Rhys, of course. All her wishes to avoid watching him, to keep her views of the man to a minimum, vanished abruptly, and she couldn’t pull her gaze away. She’d expected he would be good, but the practices at the farm hadn’t begun to prepare her for what the man was like in action. The words

irresistible force

had new meaning as he literally hewed down his competitors and tossed them aside with seeming ease.

Leo thumped her knee. “Lookit him go! Holy moly, our man’s like a hot knife through butter!”

He was indeed, and Morgan felt sorry for whoever stood in his way. She didn’t know much about battle, but as she watched Rhys make his way forward, she noticed something odd. He wasn’t engaging the opposition, at least not in the same way as his teammates. She saw Mike and Brandan struggling with their opponents—each pair forming a separate fight within the overall battle. Rhys, on the other hand, was making extraordinary progress by simply wading through the enemy lines, disarming each foe with one hand and knocking him down with the other.

Morgan wasn’t certain that the men were simply falling down on cue either. The rules of heavy combat stated that if you were struck with sufficient force, you counted yourself as wounded or dead and fell accordingly. As far as she could tell, most of Rhys’s challengers weren’t getting the opportunity to decide for themselves...

“He’s pulling his punches,” said Leo in wonder.

“What?” Morgan almost took her eyes off the field to stare at her friend. “Are you kidding me? Look at what he’s doing to his opponents!”

“Look at what they’re doing to
him
.”

It was true. Rhys was making his uncanny progress despite a countless number of stabs and slices from the castle defenders’ staves. She squinted and discerned that Rhys appeared to be anticipating the blows, turning his body aside at the last moment to shield his vitals and often ripping the weapon from their hands at the same time. There was a rhythm to it like the swing of a pendulum—
twist, bend, seize
, with a follow-through of collected force. The offender was either clubbed with his own bamboo sword or felled with Rhys’s fist. One enemy, one blow.

What kind of skill and calculation did that take in the midst of chaos?

Their team’s tactic was simple. Rhys was the point of an arrow, with Brandan, Mike, Jay, and the others forming a wedge behind him. Together they drove a path through the defenders to the faux castle, and it wasn’t long before they had gained the uppermost tower and claimed its flag. Thunderous applause erupted from the crowd, even from those who had originally been cheering for other teams. Many of the fighters Rhys had knocked down were clapping and cheering and waving as well.

Men

, thought Morgan.

Beat the living daylights out of each other, and then they’re all pals.

The humor was lost, however, as cold realization chilled her blood. Medical attendants were on the field, checking everyone over. It didn’t look like anyone was too badly hurt. And all of Rhys’s opponents were on their feet.

But if he’d been armed with a real blade

, she thought,

none of them would be getting up. Not one. And the body count would be enormous.

Jay’s words echoed in her brain:

His style of swordplay isn’t

play.

It’s kill or be killed. It’s the real thing, Morgan. And you can only get that kind of skill one way.

From one place

...

Leo’s voice broke into her thoughts. “Will you

look

at that dog,” he said. “I’ve never seen a hound so big.”

Morgan looked in the direction he was pointing. “Where?”

“Right there, down at the bottom of the stands. The big black one.”

Rhyswr?

She jumped to her feet even as her heart leapt in hope, but she saw nothing but the

crowd of people emptying the bleachers and heading out to the field. “I can’t see it. Starr, do you see a dog anywhere?”

Her friend had risen to follow the crowd, no doubt to get to Jay, but the frantic note in Morgan’s voice made her stop. “Is there a dog? There shouldn’t be—the board didn’t allow dogs this year because people didn’t pick up after them at the last fair.” She glanced around, appeared to see nothing, and continued down the steps.

“Where is it?” Morgan asked Leo, and was surprised when he stood and pointed.

“How can you miss it? It’s
right there

in front of us. Biggest dog ever. Looks like a goddamn pony and black as sin.”

The area directly in front of the bleachers cleared, and for a moment Morgan saw absolutely nothing but bare, hard-packed ground with a few fluttering bits of debris stuck to the brave few blades of grass. She blinked—

And suddenly she
did

see a dog. It wasn’t Rhyswr. It wasn’t even a mastiff. Rangy and tall, more like a wolfhound from hell, it sat with grinning jaws that seemed too wide for its face and looked directly up at Leo.

“I’ll bet it eats a whole bag of dog food in a sitting,” he said.

Morgan wasn’t sure the animal ate anything so benign. Maybe she was overtired and her imagination was running off with her, but there was something downright creepy about this dog. And how on earth had she missed—

A movement to her left drew her attention back to her friend. His left arm was jerking spasmodically away from his body and back again. “Leo, are you all right?”

The old man appeared to be talking to his disobedient arm. “What in blue blazes is the matter with you?”

Omigod, I think he’s having a stroke!

“Leo, sit down now. Let me have a look at you.”

The giant dog raised its head and howled loud and long, a dismal ululation that vibrated her very bones. At the same moment, Leo’s eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed. Morgan’s cell phone tumbled through the bleachers to the ground below as she made a frantic grab for her friend.

On the battlement of the central tower of the castle, Rhys and his teammates had their hands in the air, shouting in triumph. It was a perfect moment, with the entire crowd below hollering and waving at them. Better than anything was the purely male satisfaction of knowing that the woman he loved was in the stands and that she had witnessed his victory.

An unearthly howl sliced through the noise of the crowd like a sword's edge through paper.

No one reacted. In fact, no one seemed to have heard it except him—and that made his blood chill even more. Rhys looked over at the bleachers where Morgan stood beside Leo and Ranyon. Something wasn't right. The ellyll was swinging on Leo's arm as if trying to pull him away from something. Morgan had hold of Leo's other arm, even as he was trying to point down at the field. Rhys's gaze followed to the ground in front of the bleachers where something large and black—

Gods alive, it was a grim.

"No!" he yelled and began pushing his way down the steps. It was impossible with so many people trying to make their way up. He ran back to the balustrade—shouting at his friends: "Leo's in trouble!"—and sprang to a ladder that was leaning against the castle wall. There was a sea of people beneath it, and some were on it.

Damn it!

He couldn't jump—it was a good thirty feet to the ground.

Jay and Mike were at his side at once. "Leo's going down," said Mike, and Rhys snapped his head around in time to see Leo crumple to the floor of the bleachers.

As Jay whipped out a cell phone and dialed 911, Brandan jumped onto the ladder ahead of Rhys and started booting at people and waving them away. "Emergency," he yelled. "Get the fuck out of the way!" He menaced them with his padded sword and swatted a few with the flat of it. For a moment it looked like the crowd wasn't paying attention, but Brandan was nearly as big as Rhys, and finally they began moving back, slowly at first, then quickly. The ladder emptied in front of him, and Rhys came down fast behind him.