

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (32 page)

The horse was gone.

Morgan had her own battle going on as she tried to drive with an enormous mastiff stuffed into the backseat—and part of the front seat—of her little red car. She'd thought at first about going back to the clinic and getting the van, which she'd once used to transport Rhyswr. But she hadn't counted on Fred's determination. Having finally made up his mind to accept her, he wasn't about to let her out of his sight. Rather than stress him, she decided to make the best of it.

Which meant her car's interior was about seven-eighths occupied with dog.

"You need a breath mint, bud," she said as she kept trying to shove his massive drooling muzzle aside so she could center herself behind the steering wheel.

Thank heavens for power windows.

She opened the front passenger one all the way despite the coolness of the night and was relieved when Fred automatically stuck his head out of it. It helped alleviate the thick doggy odor in the vehicle too. Morgan mentally put

bath

at the top of her list of

Things to Do with Fred

. Then relegated that chore to second place. Job one was going to have to be finding a bigger vehicle if she was going to have a canine companion of such size.

They thankfully made it to her farm without incident. She got out of the car, planning to go around and open the door for Fred. Instead, he bolted out of the driver's side behind her and Morgan landed on her butt in the driveway. Of course he thought she was playing...

Morgan decided that letting Fred in the house right away would be a big mistake. While Rhyswr had been dignified and careful—not to mention recuperating from a life-threatening wound—Fred was far too excited at the moment to curb his enthusiasm. Plus, she was willing to bet he had a lot of pent-up energy to spend.

It was dark and moonless, with a distant storm on the horizon, but she had strings of colored lights around the backyard, leftovers from the previous owner. Some of the vintage plastic shades looked like giant flowers, some looked like Japanese lanterns, and many looked like grimacing tiki gods. All were faded by countless summers. The light they cast was more than pleasant, however, even magical. Or maybe the magic was in the simple joy of playing with a dog that so resembled the one

she had loved. Morgan pulled a small bin of brand-new pet toys out of the shed, things she'd collected to share with Rhyswr. Now she tossed tennis balls and Frisbees for Fred, played tug-of-war with big chew ropes. A heavy-duty rubber toy shaped like a tire quickly became his favorite, and when he'd had enough chasing, he settled at her feet with it between his massive front paws.

"You look like one of the stone lions on the steps of the library," she laughed.

Wrong color, though.

While Fred's expressive face had the typical black mask associated with his breed, his dark coat wasn't completely black. Instead, stripes of rich coffee brown and tufts of sandy gray were woven through it to create an engaging brindle color. "Come on, handsome boy," she said. "Let's get you a drink, and then we'll get you settled." Morgan glanced at the barn, but all was dark. It was getting late enough that if Rhys was there, he was probably asleep.

Or he might have taken her at her word and left.

She grabbed her chest as a pain that was very nearly physical lanced her heart.

Crap.

She expected that thinking about Rhys would hurt, but not this much. At least not this much

still

. And for some perverse reason, the man's words came back to her:

It's not the number of days that decides the strength of the bond.

Her rational mind insisted that Rhys had simply lingered at Leo's bedside or perhaps even gone home with Jay and Starr so he could be closer to the hospital. Most of all, her mind told her she shouldn't care so much where the hell Rhys was. Her heart didn't seem to be buying it, but

damned

if she was going out to the barn to look for him.

"Come on, Fred," she repeated and headed for the house. She probably wasn't going to get much sleep again tonight, but at least she wouldn't be alone. In fact, she might have more company than she really wanted—Fred probably wasn't going to be receptive to sleeping in the laundry room.

Lucy's stall was empty—its gate flung wide as the stable door had been. A quick search of the corral and immediate fields turned up nothing. The horse's coat was pale dapple-gray, her mane and tail white. With that coloring, she should stand out like a ghost against the night landscape no matter how dark it was. And the faint rumble of faraway thunder on the horizon warned that it would grow darker yet before the night was over. Yet Rhys could not see a hint of the horse anywhere, and worse, neither could Ranyon even with the natural night vision of his kind. There were no tracks to be seen, not even so much as a bent grass stem to indicate which way the big mare had gone.

Rhys whistled for Lucy as they walked past the silent fields. The horse would surely come if she could hear him.

If she was able to.

He already had his suspicions. It was certain that Lucy didn't open the stall or the barn doors on her own—and it wasn't that she couldn't have. At full strength, a big draft horse like her could easily kick the barn door to splinters if she was of a mind to. Instead, the latches and hinges of the stall gate and the barn door were perfectly intact. They'd been deliberately opened by

hands

.

Rhys noticed that Ranyon was having trouble keeping up with his long stride. He scooped him up and sat him on his wide shoulder.

"A fine seat this is and a better view, but I see no horse. Could be that Morgan gave the beast back to her owners."

Rhys shook his head. "The timid woman who owns Lucy is too nervous to have the mare back until she's completely healed. And Morgan would put the good of the horse first, always. Lucy's wounds are still being dressed daily, and two of those cuts are fair deep. They must heal from the inside out and infection is still a worry." They crossed the rise and got their first clear view of the line between Morgan's farmland and the forest beyond.

Three fence posts were down, broken wires limp and flattening the tall grass. Many things could have caused it, Rhys told himself as he approached the tangle. Rotted wood. Moose or elk. Even humans on their damned noisy ATVs. He appealed to the gods.

Let it be anything but what I think it is.

But the gods didn't appear to be listening as he spied a pale tangle of long white horsehairs caught in the wire. "Gods alive," hissed Rhys, as rage threatened to choke him. "She tried to jump the fence." Ugly pictures ran through his mind of the already injured horse failing to clear the fence and crashing through it instead. The thought of all those deep and ragged cuts, so painstakingly sutured by Morgan and now torn asunder, sickened him.

Ranyon slid from his shoulder and studied the ground. "A horse with her injuries would never try this fence on her own. And no human could drive her to run at it either."

Rhys had thought the same, but hearing it was like a blow to the heart. "The Fair Ones have her," he murmured.

And they'll ride her into the ground.

His people had always employed a variety of methods to keep faery beings from getting to their horses in the night. The tiny

pisgies

would only tease, and in the morning, an owner would find his animals' manes cleverly braided or

their tails tied into knots. Ranyon's people, the ellyllon, dearly loved to play tricks, often putting the bridles and blankets on the cattle or the sheep. But other faeries, like the

gwyllion

, were inclined to ride the horses over the countryside until dawn. In the morning, a farmer would find his beasts in their enclosures—exhausted, lathered, and wild-eyed.

It was exactly the kind of thing that the horseshoes mounted over the doorways of the barn were supposed to prevent. But Rhys had known as he was placing them that only lesser fae could be so easily repelled.

“The Tylwyth Teg themselves have had a hand in this,” he declared, as white-hot anger flooded his gut. He drew the Roman-like sword from its sheath—he could use it one-handed, and its shorter blade path would afford him better maneuverability in the forest beyond. With his other hand, he drew his dagger.

Ranyon seized the hem of Rhys’s shirt with a twiggy hand. “Ya can’t be thinking of going in there.”

“I’ll not have another chance to track them so surely—I can see from here they’ve left a path through the brush that a child could follow.”

“Aye, and ’tis no mistake. They’ll be expecting ya to follow them. You’ll be a grim or you’ll be dead before ya reach the end of that path. And for naught, because Lucy is surely miles from here.

Look.

” The ellyll pointed to the north where black clouds piled up along the horizon, far darker than the night sky and simmering with lightning.

Rhys’s knuckles were white around the hilt of his sword, and the muscles in his jaws jumped with the tension. He felt like a tightly coiled spring, keen to deliver justice to the cruel and callous beings who had bespelled his friend’s life and now drove a good horse to its doom. But Ranyon was right. What Rhys sought was not at the end of this path.

“I’d follow those murdering lladdwyr to hell if it’d help Leo,” said Ranyon. He adjusted his Blue Jays hat and pulled one of the throwing hatchets from the rope around his waist. His small hands brandished it like a battle-ax, and Rhys had no doubt he would wield it like one. “But we’re up against a crafty and powerful foe. Tell me, if the fae were Romans seeking to take over yer land, would ya go after them in this manner?”

It was another cold slap of reality. Rhys’s father and older brothers had been among the many brave Celts who had died in battle against the troops of Rome. By the time Rhys had reached his full growth, it was obvious to all that the conquerors could not be defeated directly. While many of the remnants of his clan and the surrounding tribes accepted their new rulers, Rhys and others devoted themselves to building bands of resistance fighters. If the occupiers could be harried enough, they might decide the misty forests and hills of his people weren’t worth the inconvenience of holding them.

“No,” he admitted. The Romans were many and mighty. It would have been foolish to launch an assault head-on. The fae were no less numerous than they, and far more powerful.

A new thought came to him swiftly and painfully, like a kick to the gut.

The fae are like the Romans in more ways than one.

Were there wagers being made on what he would choose to do? Rhys made a noise of disgust and spat on the ground, cursing his own stupidity. Had he truly thought he was free? What was this but Isca Silurum all over again? He was merely entertaining a different set of captors.

He'd never left the damned arena.

Rhys wanted to scream out his rage and frustration, hack and gouge at a flesh and blood opponent. Tear the forest down with his bare hands. Anything to channel the fury that roared through him. Anything to wreak vengeance and retribution upon his former captors. Taking a deep cleansing breath and then another, he fought to get control of his temper.

Anger leads to folly.

He paced back and forth along the fence line, calling on all the disciplines he'd ever learned in battle and in the ring.

There can be no revenge without a plan.

He needed a clear head; he needed to think.

Always do the unexpected.

Surprise had been Rhys's greatest weapon when he fought the Romans. He had survived in the arena by utilizing the element of surprise there too. So if the Tylwyth Teg expected him to follow the path they'd made into the forest, then the best tactic was to do precisely the opposite. It rankled to leave Lucy in the hands of the fae—the steadfast mare deserved better—but Ranyon was right. The poor ceffyl was out of his reach and likely to be already dead or dying. As in battle, he ordered himself to feel the pain of her loss later, to focus on the demands of the present. Deep inside, however, he vowed that the Fair Ones would pay dearly for their cruelty.

Slowly, carefully, he sheathed his sword and dagger as he sheathed his smoldering anger, and addressed the ellyll. "Will the Tylwyth Teg bring Lucy back to her stall? Is the Law of Benthylg yet great enough that even they will honor it?"