

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (33 page)

“The Fair Ones are as prideful as ever. The mare will be returned by dawn—if the lesser fae don’t feast on her first.”

Rhys cursed again. The idea of the big gray horse, lame and bleeding, being trailed by a motley collection of hungry creatures from the faery realm was horrifying. By all the gods, he should have dispatched the leering, hissing misfits that snarled at him as he’d hammered iron nails into the fence posts. Instead, he’d pitied them. They’d been used and then betrayed by the Tylwyth Teg, just as he had. But he should have considered that, though the creatures were small, they still needed to eat, and the gods alone knew what they might prey upon. “We need to close this fence against the unnatural beasts.”

The two of them walked back and forth along the break in the fence line, sprinkling Starr’s dried primroses and marsh marigolds over the ground where the fallen wire lay. Rhys dared not blunt the edges of his weapons trying to cut the coils, but Ranyon donated one of the throwing axes to the cause. Used as a hatchet, it quickly freed the wire from the fallen posts, and Rhys threw the tangled mess safely aside. The way was clear through the trampled grass if Lucy came this way again—and was brave enough to cross it. She had to be terrified of wire by now. But if she made it back to Morgan’s land, any lesser fae would be unable to pursue her farther.

“That’s all we can do for poor Lucy,” Rhys said at last and began jogging back the way they’d come. He caught hold of Ranyon’s twiggy hand and swung him up to his shoulder once more. “We need to hurry and prepare a fit welcome for the Fair Ones.”

“Aye,” said the ellyll, setting his hat low over his eyes. “Ya can wager I’ve a charm fer that.”

TWENTY-ONE

M

organ lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling. She’d expected to have trouble sleeping, but it wasn’t the massive dog’s snores that were keeping her awake. Fred hadn’t tried to climb in with her either, thank heavens. Instead, he seemed perfectly comfortable at the foot of her bed, on the giant dog pillow that had once been Rhyswr’s. Perfectly content too. At bedtime, he’d laid down immediately with what sounded like a happy sigh, and was snoring moments later.

A big day for a big dog

, she thought, especially after so little activity for over a month. Traveling to what Ellen had charmingly called his forever home, and then exploring it, had tired him. Not to mention playing for an hour in the yard and then inhaling dog food as if he'd never seen it before.

If he has his appetite back, he's feeling pretty good.

She felt good too, at least about Fred. Everything else, however, was weighing heavily on her. Morgan was worried about Leo. And seeing Rhys at the Ren fair had bothered her more than she thought. As had that last encounter at the hospital.

Have faith in me

, he'd said.

Have faith in

us

...We have much to say to each other yet, anwylyd.

Tears started in her eyes, and she scrubbed them away angrily on the sleeve of her pajamas. She was so done with crying. Hoping for a distraction, she got up as quietly as she could and padded down the hallway in the dark. She'd barely reached the kitchen before Fred was at her side, an enormous shadow in more ways than one. He was quiet, however, and simply lay at her feet as she sat at the table.

Nainie's photo in its oversize frame was illuminated by the kitchen night-light. It lent the picture a rich golden glow and highlighted parts not usually apparent in the daytime. Morgan turned her head slowly from side to side, studying the photo from different angles. The camera had reflected on a narrow glimmering line just inside the neck of Nainie's dress. That had to be the chain of her necklace—the one that Morgan was now wearing beneath her pajama top. She patted the medallion beneath the flannel, chuckling a little at the silly cartoon cats and dogs that adorned the fabric. It was an irreverent setting for such exquisite jewelry. Yet Nainie had never spoken of the value of the necklace, at least not in monetary terms. She'd never cautioned her granddaughter to be careful of the priceless item, or to wear it only on special occasions, or to even hide it. It was clearly a tool and meant to be used. But for what?

Her eyes still on the photograph, Morgan drew the medallion from its resting place against her skin.

It'll help you to have faith...and show you truth

...

Faith in what? The truth of what, exactly?

Rhys's words came unbidden.

Have faith in me. Have faith in

us.

She studied the medallion in her hand, its glittering silver chain draped over her fingers. The mysterious central stone gleamed in the soft light. "Nainie, what am I supposed to do?"

What on earth is the truth in all of this?" she asked aloud. "I'm so darn confused."

Morgan knew, when all was said and done, that what she felt for Rhys was far more than just physical attraction. Though that itself was powerful, it wasn't why she thought about him constantly. Why she was both furious with him and lapsing into crying jags at the drop of a hat.

"I love him. I want to be with him, even if he
is
crazy. And—
even if he isn't
."

There. She'd finally said it out loud. Confessed it before her grandmother's photo that looked down from the wall like a kindly icon. Spoken the words before the great dog that lay at her feet with his guileless soul in his eyes as he looked up at her. The medallion, naturally cool, felt warm in her hand as she considered what she'd just said.

For the first time, she allowed herself to freely examine the strange events that had unfolded ever since she first visited Wales, and all the evidence she'd insisted on dismissing and denying. The mysterious arrival of her beloved black dog, Rhyswr, and his equally strange disappearance. The dog's unique collar, created from soft silver made impossibly strong by unknown methods. The timing of Rhys's appearance in her laundry room—not to mention his lack of clothing. Rhys's uncanny proficiency with both animals and ancient weapons. And
of course

Morgan recognized her own work on Rhys's body. It was as unique as a signature. Her instructors at veterinary college had always been able to pinpoint her tiny careful sutures, teasing her that she could have a successful backup career as a tailor. That the incision was now on a man's body rather than a dog's didn't negate the fact that it was her handiwork.

She murmured Jay's favorite quote, one from Sherlock Holmes that normally would have irritated her: "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth..."

Must be.

Which meant she'd been a complete and total idiot.

"Rhys. I have to tell Rhys!" A chill ran through her as she remembered she'd ordered him to leave—what if he were already gone?

No. He wouldn't leave the horse. Not without making sure I knew.

So was he still with Leo, or was he right over there in the barn, sound asleep?

Hell, with Leo in the hospital, Rhys probably wasn't getting much more sleep than she was. And maybe, just maybe, he was thinking about Morgan too. She hoped so. Damned if she wanted to be the only person in this relationship who was totally miserable...

Damned if she wanted to be the only person in this relationship, period.

She got up and found Fred at the window. She hadn't even heard him move, but his body language clearly spoke of high alert. His muzzle was pressed against the glass, but she couldn't see much outside herself. The yard light was on the pitiful side, with barely enough wattage to cast a faint greenish glow on the buildings. "Whatcha looking at, bud?" she asked and rested her hand on his broad back, but Fred didn't move. The faint rumble of thunder told her that a storm was moving in, and Morgan wondered if the dog was afraid of it. He didn't look very fearful, however—beneath her hand, the fur along his spine bristled up into a thick ridge. A deep growl resonated from his throat, but he didn't bark.

"Did you hear some coyotes out there?" Although she'd never seen one on her own land, bears wandered the area too. Only last month, she'd been called in to help examine an enormous black bear that had been tranked by wildlife officials in the middle of a Spokane Valley neighborhood. There was no hint of movement in the farmyard, though—at least not anywhere the light shone.

Maybe Fred had sensed Lucy moving around in the barn? Or perhaps even Rhys.

"Shall we go check it out?" she asked the dog. Truthfully, she wasn't the least bit concerned if local wildlife was paying a visit to the farm. What she really wanted was to talk to Rhys, even if it was the middle of the night—or well into the wee hours, as her nainie would say. Morgan sighed as she got dressed.

Didn't feel like sleeping anyway.

Thank heavens she had a couple more days off. Maybe she could grab a nap on the porch swing later...

Fred followed her readily to the kitchen and watched as she tied her shoes. He seemed keen to go yet wasn't frantic to get out the door as many dogs would be. Morgan talked to him about the importance of staying with her as she snapped on his thick leather leash, yet all the while she had a mental picture of being dragged into the forest at high speed if the two hundred-plus pounds of dog decided to chase something.

She needn't have worried. Fred didn't launch himself out the door like a rocket, nor did he even tug at the leash in her hand. Instead, he walked beside her. He was still on high alert, and he swung his great head back and forth, watching, watching...It was like having a lion as an escort, decided Morgan. Fortified by Fred's giant presence, she elected to do a quick sweep of the yard around the buildings, just in case. Behind the barn, she was stopped in her tracks—literally. Fred stood sideways, blocking her in the same way she'd seen seeing-eye dogs use their bodies to prevent their blind owners from making a dangerous misstep. He looked up at her, then looked away to growl at the storm approaching from the north. And gazed back at her again. Morgan frowned as she tried to make sense of the dog's actions. Clearly he was trying to communicate something. Was it the storm that had been bothering him all along? If so, this was strange behavior. Most dogs bothered by thunder and lightning hid under the bed or in the basement—they didn't venture outside to deliberately challenge it. But then she thought about the great black dog in Wales that had seemingly followed the tour bus wherever it went. Come to think of it, that dog—Rhyswr—had sat outside in a

tremendous storm without so much as a tremble. Were all mastiffs a little on the odd side?

“Okay,
storm bad

, I get it.” And the dog might be right. The night was already dark due to the hidden moon, but the rapidly approaching clouds seemed blacker than black. Near-continuous lightning illumed the roiling mass with strange colors. She wasn’t usually afraid of storms, but something in the pit of her stomach was repelled by this one. Quickly, Morgan headed for the back door of the barn with Fred in tow. Thankfully the big dog didn’t try to go through the small entrance at the same time, but followed close behind her. She closed the door after him and stood for a few minutes until her eyes adjusted. The yard light’s pale, greenish rays barely penetrated the windows. Beside her, Fred was alert, but calm and quiet. Morgan was relieved by that—she hadn’t even thought of what might happen if he barked and startled Lucy. Finally she could see well enough to make her way to the mare’s box stall. It was empty.

Morgan went from stall to stall, expecting that Rhys had simply moved the horse to another spot. Dim as it was, it wouldn’t be possible to hide the pale-coated mare. The horse simply wasn’t in the stable anywhere.

“Rhys!” she yelled. “Rhys, where are you?” She ran to the stacked bales where the man had made his bed. A part of her reacted viscerally to the spot where passion had once rocked them both and bonded them. The rest of her was all too furious that he was sleeping peacefully under the quilts while her patient was MIA. She lunged forward to shake him awake—

Powerful arms grabbed her from behind. A hand the size of her whole face covered her mouth before she could yell for Fred, and she was yanked back against a hard, muscled body. She did her best to fight and managed to get in a couple of solid elbow jabs before his arms clamped down so hard her upper body could no longer move. She settled for kicking backward at her assailant’s shins and trying to get a leg between his and trip him as she was dragged inside the small dark tack room. Where was her dog? Why wasn’t he chewing this guy’s ass off?

“Be calm,” ordered a familiar voice in her ear. “You’ve no reason to fear, anwylyd. But you must be quiet. Gods alive, why are you here at this time?”

He released her and she whirled, slapping for the light switch on the wall. The forty-watt bulb was like high noon in the tiny windowless room, and she had to squint to focus. She didn’t need to see Rhys to yell at him, however. “Where is Lucy? And what have you done to my dog? And who the hell is

that
in your bed?”

In a heartbeat, he had his hand over her mouth again, and she was backed against the wall. “Your dog is unharmed, and there’s naught but straw and clothes in my bed made to look like me.” He paused and seemed to take a deep breath. “You must keep your voice low. The Fair Ones are coming, and there may be advance guards. You would be in danger if they learn of your presence here with me.”

