

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (34 page)

She stilled and he removed his hand. "The Tylwyth Teg are coming *here*?" she whispered.

"Aye. They've taken the horse, and fae law says they must return her by dawn." He looked expectant, and his palm was open and at the ready, no doubt anticipating that he would have to muffle a flurry of angry protests.

Instead she was quiet for a long moment. "What can we do?" she asked finally.

The simple question caught him off guard. Wonder and hope crossed his features even as the harsh light made his face look just as battle hardened as he claimed to be. Morgan looked down and saw the sheathed sword and the dagger in his belt. "You're going to fight them, aren't you?"

He recovered himself. "Aye, I am. But not with you here. Go back to the house and stay there. The fae cannot cross the threshold of a dwelling without an invitation. You'll be safe."

"And you'll be out here, one against how many?" She gestured at his sword. "Is this all you have to defend yourself with?"

"Iron is the only thing that harms them."

She nodded, remembering Nainie's stories. Iron was like kryptonite to the Fair Ones. But you had to get close enough to use it. "I know you're amazing with those weapons, but even you can't do this by yourself."

"He's not alone, good lady," said a voice behind her. Morgan jumped sideways and was caught by Rhys's muscled arm as she looked down in amazement. "And we've more than a few tricks up our sleeves."

A small character barely taller than her knees waved at her. Bright-blue eyes looked out from under a brighter-blue baseball cap. Wild brown braids of hair escaped from the hat, tangled with oak leaves. A thick layer of leaves sheathed the stocky little body, and with skin that looked like tree bark, the thin arms and legs bore a strange resemblance to the branches of saplings.

Beside him, Fred lay on the floor snoring. The little man winked at her. "Yer fine great dog is not harmed."

She knelt in wonder, some unknown instinct leading her to make herself of equal height. It was more than simply trying not to frighten the amazing creature. Her brain whirled with numberless thoughts and images, all unintelligible save for Nainie's long-ago

words:

There are many things all around us that are old and powerful...They're not to be feared but to be respected, and it's long been a gift in our family to know them.

"Are you—are you of the Tylwyth Teg?" she asked. Her voice sounded faint, even to her, and she drew back against Rhys's legs as the little creature frowned.

Rhys knelt at once and put a reassuring arm around her. "No, anwylyd, Ranyon is fae but he's an ellyll. The Fair Ones are his enemies too, and he is my friend."

"Aye. And I've thrown my lot in with his," Ranyon said, extending a hand to her.

She grasped the long twiggy fingers gently, surprised to find they were warm. "I'm Morgan. Leo spoke of you. And I'm throwing my lot in here too," she declared. The words had barely left her lips before she was seized by the shoulders and lifted bodily to her feet—and then some. She was standing on empty air as she stared eye to eye with Rhys. "Put me down!"

"Go to the house at once. I cannot fight them if you're not safe." He gave her a shake before setting her on the ground. "They will
kill
you or take you for their own."

"And they won't kill
you

? Won't take you back or turn you into a dog again? Listen, mister, you don't tell me what to do. If you think I'm just going to hide in the house while you're out here—"

Thunder drowned out the rest of her words, rending the air and shaking the floor beneath her. Rhys held her tightly in his powerful arms, and
still

the vibrations rocked her. When the noise died away, Morgan's ears were ringing hard enough to hurt.

The ellyll cursed soundly. "They're coming," he said. Fred, now wide awake, shook himself.

"Wait a minute,
they
did that?" asked Morgan, trying to wriggle free of Rhys's arms.

He released her. "Aye. The Tylwyth Teg are riding the storm."

Terrifying illustrations from some of the old Welsh storybooks flashed into Morgan's mind. Rhys grasped her by the wrist and cautiously opened the tack room door. "Come on," he said, then jogged through the barn to its front door with her in tow. Ranyon and Fred followed close behind.

Rhys slid the door open a crack, and they studied the yard between the barn and the house. Nothing moved. No rain had fallen yet, and the air seemed charged with expectancy. Morgan made a mental note to call an electrician to change the yard light

fixture as soon as possible—its weak light seemed more greenish than ever, giving the whole area a ghostly feel. Like she needed to feel more frightened than she already did.

Ranyon slipped a strange object into her hand. “If you have this, they cannot see you. ’Tis a charm and a good one.”

She was about to ask questions when Rhys opened the door farther and pushed her toward it. “It has to be now, and fast.”

“I don’t want to—”

His mouth was hot on hers, hard, urgent, and just a little desperate. And then he pulled back. “If you love me, you’ll go. If you stay, you’ll give them leverage against me, and they will win.”

“Run, good lady,” urged Ranyon. “Run like the hounds of hell are after ya, because they surely will be if ya stay.”

“Crap,” said Morgan and bolted from the barn.

TWENTY-TWO

I
n grade school, she’d never collected more than the white participant ribbon for the hundred-yard dash. Tonight Morgan knew she would have taken first place. Heart thumping hard in her chest as if trying to escape from the cage of her ribs, she ran straight across the terrifyingly open area, as exposed as a rabbit flushed from its thicket. Fred kept pace with her, and if her mind hadn’t been completely blank with terror, she might have drawn courage from his big steady presence. What surely should only take a few seconds seemed to stretch on and on—

She collapsed inside her door, forcing Fred to leap over her. With the last of her adrenaline, Morgan spun on her knees and slammed the door behind her, just as another roll of thunder shattered the silence. Fred nosed her, and she threw her arms around the dog’s enormous neck, holding on until the echoes died away and the house stopped vibrating. Or maybe

she

was the source of the vibration—when silence finally returned, she discovered she was shaking. The mastiff, on the other hand, seemed concerned about her but otherwise steady as ever. “Fred, you’ve got nerves of steel,” she said, rubbing behind his ears. “I’m not afraid of thunder, but that’s the loudest I’ve ever—”

No, it’s not the loudest I’ve heard.

Morgan thought back to the night in the Welsh hotel when she’d been awakened by deafening thunder directly overhead—and discovered the black dog outside. Had the Tylwyth Teg been riding that night too? She shivered at the thought. Nainie’s stories had warned that mortals in the path of the Wild Hunt could disappear, spirited away to the faery realm or forced to follow the hunt forever—dead or alive. According to her

grandmother's tales, most of the riders in the hunting party were captives, and many of the horses were "borrowed" from mortals. Is that where poor Lucy was?

"Goddamn it, they'll kill her," she said aloud. That horse was in no condition to be running around, much less pushed to her limit. If she remembered right, the stories said that only a few of the hunters were actually of the Tylwyth Teg—but those were without pity. They whipped and drove both horses and captives equally. And their quarry had no hope.

In some of the tales, the Wild Hunt's purpose was to capture a particular individual who had been greedy or unjust, but the Fair Ones were whimsical by nature. Unless appeased or amused, they were as likely to seize the innocent as they were to ride down the guilty.

Did Rhys and Ranyon actually stand a chance against such beings?

The palm of her hand hurt, and she realized she still had Ranyon's charm clutched tightly in her fist. She opened her stiff fingers and studied the strange thing he'd given her. It seemed to be a lump of clear quartz wrapped with copper wire and a few bright glass beads. It was kind of pretty, she thought. She had no idea if it actually worked—but she was going to find out. There was no way she was going to just sit here in the house and do nothing.

If iron was the Achilles' heel of the Tylwyth Teg, then she was going to damn well look for some. And then she was going back to the barn.

There was no need to turn the lights on—there was no darkness. The storm was still over the fields, but its lightning strobed strange hues of blue and green and pink through the windows. With it, guttural thunder pounded the senses as if with physical blows.

Shielding his eyes as best as he could, Rhys risked looking out the small window in the back door. He could see the leading edge of the storm clearly, like a great roiling black wall of cloud that nearly brushed the ground as it approached. There had been late grain in the fields, but in the morning, it would be flattened and impossible to harvest.

For a split second, he wondered if he would be around to see it, then shoved that thought away. He was preparing for a battle that was mere minutes away, and doubts were a weakness he couldn't afford. He turned back to the tasks at hand. Looking longer at the encroaching storm would only lead to discerning the horrors within it. He'd seen the Wild Hunt before, when he had been an emotionless grim and unaffected by their terrible appearance. By all the gods, he was glad that Morgan was safely in her house.

"You gave her your charm," he said to Ranyon. They had only to put the finishing touches on their preparations. The ellyll scrambled up the loft ladder and tossed down a rope.

"Aye, well, she needed to be safe or you'd be distracted."

“My thanks to you.”

The rope went through a pulley in the ridge beam. Rhys hauled the load upward until Ranyon gave him a signal. “Just hold it there for a wink,” he said and busied himself around it. “’Tis solid now.”

Rhys released the rope slowly. Nothing fell. “Do you have another charm to hide yourself with?”

“I have many charms, but not another like that. It takes time to make such a thing. But I can burrow in the straw up here like a mouse.”

“A strange and spindly mouse, for sure.”

Ranyon huffed in mock offense. “Aye, well, it’s not me that the Fair Ones are looking for, now is it?” He disappeared into the dark loft.

No

, thought Rhys.

It’s me they want.

He felt the pommel of the sheathed sword beneath his palm. The strange icy calm that came before a battle settled over him like a cloak. Muscles in his arms twitched, snake-ready as adrenaline began to surge through his system. With the eerie lightning flashing all around him and thunder hammering at his brain, he reached for his anger as a man might reach for a weapon. This time, he was no collared dog for the Fair Ones to play with. And he wasn’t a wounded and dying man who couldn’t defend himself.

Rhys melted into the deep shadows between the bales and the wall, one of the few spots where even the lightning couldn’t reach. He hefted a sword in one hand and a dagger in the other. Iron had been forged into steel to create them, as he had once been forged into the Bringer of Death.

This was no arena match, however. This time he had to win, not to save his own life, but Leo’s. Morgan’s life was on the line as well, although she didn’t know it. Like Leo, the Tylwyth Teg had her singled out and marked for their malicious mischief—all because of him.

It ended here.