

# Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (35 page)

Iron. What the hell did she have that was made of  
*iron*

? Her kitchen knives were ceramic. She didn't own a gun. As quickly as she could, Morgan searched the house and piled things on the kitchen table as she found them. Finally she stopped and surveyed the motley collection. A pair of iron bookends in the shape of kittens. A rooster doorstop. An old set of fireplace tools. A cast-iron Dutch oven. And a large skillet with a frustratingly short handle. She glanced up at the photo of Nainie.

*What am I going to do with this?*

Anything remotely weapon-like was out in the machine shed or the garage—hammers, axes, and other tools. There was even a rusted scythe in the old workshop, although it was probably too clumsy for her to use effectively. But she didn't dare risk trying to reach any of those buildings. She'd be lucky to get to the barn.

A sudden thought had her yanking out the junk drawer on the end of the counter near the door. In the hail of debris that tumbled to the floor, Morgan was able to secure an enormous screwdriver. The vintage tool looked big enough to tune up a tractor, but it had been on the kitchen counter when she moved in. The blade was rusted, and she hoped that meant it was iron. The handle had a few inches of baling wire threaded through it, and she twisted it to a loop on her jeans. It was goofy looking, but she could tear it free in a heartbeat if she had to use it. And she fervently hoped that she had whatever it took to use it.

Morgan looked up at Nainie's picture again. "I can't let Rhys face them alone. I can't. They'll kill him or they'll take him away. I won't let that happen." Somehow she knew that her grandmother would understand. Hell, she'd probably even approve—after all, Nainie had been no shrinking violet. Glad to be wearing the treasured necklace, Morgan grasped the cool stone pendant through the fabric of her shirt. It reminded her of a favor given to a knight to carry into battle, and there was a satisfying sense of  
*rightness*

in having it next to her skin.

Thinking of Nainie shook loose more memories of the old stories. Morgan added a shaker of salt to her arsenal, tucking it in her jeans pocket. A loaf of bread was often useful when dealing with the fae. A fast search yielded three stale slices and a heel in a rumpled bag. Goddamn it, why hadn't she gone shopping? Desperately, she dug through the freezer and finally came up with a leftover cinnamon roll. It was large for a roll, but pretty damn small for a loaf of bread.

*It's probably stale enough to use as a weapon.*

She took it with her anyway.

Morgan decided the skillet might be a good shield and tied a loop of stout twine through its handle. If she lost her grip, she hoped the loop would stay around her arm and the frying pan wouldn't fly away from her. The poker looked promising. She threw on a vivid red ski vest with very large pockets and stuck a bookend in each one. She wasn't sure how she was going to use them, but she felt better having them—even if they weighed a *ton*

. She had a healthy new respect for the knights in armor at the Renaissance fair.

Another length of twine helped her hang Ranyon's strange charm around her neck—and then she looked at Fred. What did

*he*

have to protect himself? She could leave him behind, safe in the house, but the truth was, she might need him. Nainie had

said that when she was growing up, people carried iron nails in their pockets to ward off faery interference or sewed nails into the hems of their clothing. Morgan ran to her office and dumped the magnifying glass out of its small leather pouch, then raced to the cellar to fill the pouch from an old jar of nails in the otherwise empty pantry. A few moments later, the pouch hung against Fred's dark brindle chest, tied and duct-taped to his collar.

Having armed herself and her companion as best as she could, all she had to do now was cross the huge open space that was her yard. Again. Only this time, she had enough metal on her to attract all that lightning that was currently hammering the fields in the distance.

*If you can see the cloud, you can be struck.*

If that adage was true, then she could have been toasted during the dash to the house. It was completely insane to go outside again. The lightning was near continuous now, and she'd be much smarter to hide in the basement till morning. But that wasn't going to help Rhys.

The power flickered and went out.

Morgan peered out the kitchen window toward the barn. Nothing moved in the yard—although, it was hard to be certain with the strobing effect of the lightning. She squinted her eyes and grabbed a pair of sunglasses from the shelf over the coatrack. Who'd have thought she'd ever need them in the middle of the frickin' night? She studied the farmyard and the area around the barn, but nothing appeared to be lurking there. The field behind the far side of the barn was another story.

The thunderstorm appeared to be hovering low just beyond the fence line. Inky black clouds roiled continuously as if the storm were alive somehow, and the lightning illuminated it from within with strange unnatural colors. Morgan was about to look away from the bright spectacle when she spotted something within the storm. Several somethings. She stared, letting the poker and the skillet slide to the floor unheeded, as the images became clear to her.

A flurry of horses and riders circled the field in the very midst of the storm, a furious and dreadful host: riders in faded finery and tarnished saddlery, riders in rags riding

bareback. Riders with the appearance of flesh and blood on wild-eyed steeds. Skeletons astride ivory-boned mounts. Ghostly riders on phantom horses. All were subject to the shining figures on red-eyed horses that drove both riders and mounts with crackling whips of light. The furious host circled round and round in the field, the pounding hooves creating the thunder that even now shook the floor beneath Morgan's feet. Massive hounds, some blackest black, some white, some red as blood, bayed at the heels of the captives.

*The Wild Hunt was here.*

Both fascinated and terrified, Morgan watched as the spectral figures dashed at the fence and away again, over and over, as if the simple wire were a barrier they couldn't cross. It wasn't until Fred nudged her repeatedly with his nose that she was able to shake free of the vision. She turned and slid down the door until she was cross-legged with her back against it, breathing hard.

*Omigod, omigod.*

What was she going to do? What made her think that she could go up against something like that? She was no warrior.

But Rhys thought she was.

*The best of healers are warriors at heart.*

She wasn't sure about the best of healers part, but she did know she was a fighter. She didn't quit. Not on her patients in the clinic, and not now on the man who held her heart. She fingered the charm that Ranyon had given her and hoped like hell it would work. She swallowed hard, gathered up the poker and the skillet, nodded at Fred, and charged outside.

Nothing threatened her as she jogged across the open yard. The thunder and lightning seemed to let up somewhat—a relief when she was carrying so much metal. Her biggest danger was being beaten to death by the iron bookends in her vest pockets, and she clamped her elbows against them to stop them from swinging. It slowed her down not to be able to move her arms, and her collection of iron implements felt as heavy as cannonballs as she headed for the dark barn.

She was two-thirds of the way there when she stopped so abruptly that she had to flail her arms to keep her balance, and both skillet and poker tumbled to the ground. There were only two incandescent light fixtures in the stable that worked, and the power was currently out. So why was brilliant white light suddenly pouring from the open doorway of the stable and spilling out the windows? The powerful light radiated outward in all directions from every crack and crevice in the entire building. There were even tiny beams and rays shooting skyward through what she had assumed was a solid roof.

Rhys and Ranyon might be in the stable, but so was something else.

Without warning, the big double doors at the rear of the barn slammed open, and the entire building shook with the impact. A large pale horse appeared at the threshold, its head hung low, and its nose nearly touching the ground. White froth bubbled at its

mouth and nostrils, and its coat was lathered with sweat. The exhausted creature swayed as it shuffled forward on three legs, lame and limping. Blood ran from fresh stripes and gouges on its flanks as well as from the all-too-familiar wounds on its limbs.

*Lucy.*

It was all Rhys could do not to break from his hiding place. The door of her stall swung open as if by unseen hands, and he gritted his teeth as the mare took halting painful steps to it. She could barely lift her head, but managed at last to bury her nose in her water bucket and drain it. There was ample grain and hay, but she was too spent to eat. With a heartrending groan, she simply collapsed in the straw. It sickened Rhys to know that the ill-used mare would likely never get up again.

Still he held his position, knuckles white on the grip of the sword, certain that the horse hadn't come alone. Waiting. Waiting.

And then they were simply  
*there*

. Seven shining figures stood just inside the threshold. The living light that emanated from the flawless skin of the Tylwyth Teg was the same as it had always been. Their flowing white hair was bound back for the hunt, however, and their bright clothing had been traded for dark riding leathers studded with many daggers. In their beautiful hands were copper weapons of war. Rhys recognized Tyne and Daeria from the visitation in Morgan's laundry room on his last night as a dog. Daeria was clearly leading this party, and it was plain by the way she hefted her sword that this was no friendly visit.

Which suited Rhys just fine. He didn't plan to be a gracious host.

In silence, the Fair Ones glided forward, their booted feet not deigning to touch the floor of the barn. The broad walkway along the stalls compressed the party into a loose diamond formation, and Rhys held his breath as the fae crossed each straw-strewn floorboard. Until the leader passed an innocuous fist-size lump of blue livestock salt—

With a war cry that had chilled the blood of many a Roman, Rhys leapt from his hiding place and slashed a taut rope in two with his sword, then took a battle stance. With their eyes on him, the Fair Ones failed to see the harrow swinging swiftly down from the loft behind them, its heavy iron frame covered with ten-inch iron teeth, until it was too late. The farming implement proved as effective at breaking up a faery formation as it was in breaking up clods of dirt in a field. Four of the center fae were impaled outright, their copper weapons clattering to the floor as they died. A fifth stayed on his feet, his unearthly beauty marred by a swipe from an iron spike along the side of his face. Half blinded by his own pale-blue blood, he still sighted Rhys with his bow and released a gleaming silver arrow that curved in midair after its quarry, revealing its enchantment.

Rhys dropped and rolled, barely in time. The projectile looped and dove back on him, and he leapt straight up this time, bringing the sword down upon the arrow's shaft as it passed. The pieces clattered to the floor, the spell broken. Rhys was still in motion, however, and hit the floor running. Three more arrows followed and met the same fate as the first.

“Such sport you give us!” said Daeria, clapping her hands as if in delight. “You see why we simply  
*must*  
have you back.”

Rhys didn’t miss the deadly overtones in the seductive voice. “You have no claim here,” he said. “I am sworn to protect Morgan Edwards, and I am hers by your queen’s own decree.”

Daeria simply laughed, a cascade of tiny bells in a tomb. “The agreement was that you were hers only until she relinquished her claim. We clearly heard the mortal woman tell you to leave.”

“A lovers’ spat hardly qualifies as a lawful disavowal.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not, and so we have bided our time until the mortal woman tried to send you from her on three occasions. With the power of three, our claim is restored.”

Rhys kept his face impassive, but he was thinking frantically. Three? Once, certainly, when he awoke in his human body, and Morgan had him taken to jail. Two, probably when she stormed from his bed, because he wouldn’t recant his story. But three? Dear gods alive, she’d said it

*again*

when he met her at the hospital. He cursed in several languages in his head. On the outside, Rhys remained crouched in his fighter’s stance, sword and dagger at the ready. “I’m not going with you.”

“But we miss our faithful dog so. Think how happy the entire court will be to see you!”

“The court keeps many unwilling humans in the guise of dogs. One more or less hardly matters to you. What about the other grims? Like the one you deliberately sent to Leo Waterson when it’s not yet his time, in a place where the Fair Ones have no dominion. That goes against your own laws. What would your queen say if she knew?”

“Do not quote the laws to me, mortal,” Daeria hissed.

“Do not consider yourself to be above them,” he snarled back.

The fae with the wounded face ran at him with an upraised sword and from beneath the straw, an army of iron nails stood upon their heads, points up, courtesy of one of Ranyon’s charms. The faery’s momentum carried him forward two steps too far...Cursing as the poison metal penetrated both his boots and his feet, he hurled his sword. The copper blade buried itself to the hilt in a bale next to Rhys’s head—but not before Rhys’s thrown dagger caught the fae full in the throat.