

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (36 page)

Daeria screamed in rage at the loss of another of her soldiers, and Tyne was swift to throw one of his many knives. Rhys's instincts sent him diving to the left barely in time. The move saved his heart from the dagger's point, but not his shoulder. The blade pierced it through and lodged solidly in the bone. He yanked it out before it could spill its aggressive magic into his system, but it took a couple of tries and cost him precious seconds. Just enough time for Daeria to fly across the space and seize him by the throat. His sword tumbled to the floor as his head spun, as skin and bone and tendon suddenly tore away from their moorings and distorted...

TWENTY-THREE

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Despite the strangeness of the night and the terrifying proximity of the Wild Hunt, Fred neither barked nor whined. Alert and watchful, the great dog stuck to Morgan's side as if he were a presidential bodyguard. Perhaps she should get him some dark glasses too so he could look the part...

She led her canine companion to the small side door of the hired man's quarters and slipped inside. There was less of the blindingly white light here, meaning that its source was in the stable area. She clutched Fred's collar for balance and crossed the little apartment in a low crouching walk, made more difficult by all the metal she was carrying. Partway there, she stopped and slung her vest over Fred's broad back, hoping he wouldn't mind being a pack mule for a while. Her own back was relieved without the weight of the iron bookends to carry.

Immediately she could hear Rhys's voice somewhere on the far side of the door. She could hear other voices too, but there was something odd about them, a crystalline quality, like broken glass beneath the rippling surface of a stream. The unnatural sound sent a shiver through her.

Taking a deep breath, she sat with her back to the wall and reached over and turned the doorknob slowly, slowly, until the latch was free of the strike plate. She allowed the door to fall open a crack. Brilliant light blazed through the slender opening immediately. Her eyes could no more adjust to it than they could adjust to staring directly at the sun. She patted the upper pockets of the vest and thanked all the stars that her sunglasses were in one. Donning them with relief, she waited until she was sure the strange voices she heard weren't immediately near the door. The entrance into the stable led first into the half-walled section where the feed and grain was kept. Praying that no one was looking squarely in her direction, she made her way through the door on her hands and knees. It was harder than she thought

it would be—she still had a skillet and a poker to carry. Fred padded patiently behind her, apparently unaffected by the weight he carried and looking as if he wore quilted red vests every day of his life. She pulled the door to, so it would appear closed to any casual observers, then continued her awkward way over to that half wall that separated her from the open stable.

Morgan edged along until she found a vantage point—a place where a large knot in the rough wood had split and fallen away. Here she could see and still remain hidden. But she was not prepared for what she saw and clapped her hands over her mouth to keep from making a sound.

The light was coming directly from

them

—three tall, slender beings who were arguing with Rhys. They were breathtaking to look at, with fine, pale features and iridescent eyes that were blue one moment, then green, then violet. Shimmering white hair flowed over their shoulders, and their clothes were exquisitely made. There was no question who they were.

The Fair Ones.

Omigod.

As she watched, the sword-wielding fae fell to the floor. The unearthly shriek of the female fae was as sharp and violent as a flood bursting through plate glass windows. It hurt Morgan's ears but wasn't nearly as horrifying as the sight of a faery dagger appearing in Rhys's shoulder.

As the female lunged for the wounded warrior, Morgan was over the wall. The male fae had glinting copper daggers in each shining white hand, ready to attack again if need be. Anger surged through Morgan's system, coupled with stark fear for Rhys. Silently, she ran up behind the tall male and swung the iron skillet with all her strength. It smashed him in the back of the head and he fell to his knees. She drew the heavy pan back like a baseball bat, ready for another swing, but the luminous being swayed and fell forward onto his face. Morgan didn't know if he was unconscious or dead—she'd never hit anyone before, much less a fae—and the surprise made her hesitate for a split second.

Fred didn't hesitate, however. He leapt onto her back, knocking her flat just as a pair of copper daggers struck the stable door above them. The dog's momentum sent the red vest sliding off with a heavy clunk. Morgan jumped up into a crouch with one of the bookends cradled in her hand like a shot put. It was another middle school event in which she'd never excelled, but fury and adrenaline were giving her a massive boost—and the mocking fae was less than twenty feet away. The otherworldly creature was looking right at her, however, and Morgan automatically felt at her throat. Ranyon's charm was gone, twine and all. It had probably fallen off after she crossed the yard. *Great, just great.*

"You're far too late, useless mortal," laughed the fae. "I've already changed him."

The writhing form at the faery's feet slowly blackened with an eruption of glossy fur even as his limbs flailed and altered before

Morgan's eyes. "No!" she screamed and threw the kitten-shaped bookend with all her strength. Her aim was true enough—but the female simply sidestepped it, and the iron thudded dully to the floor alongside the black shape that lay upon the wooden floor. The dog's sides heaved hard as if from immense exertion, but otherwise, the massive canine didn't move. His familiar golden eyes were open but unfocused.

"He's mine now." The fae shoved at the mastiff with a finely made boot.

Not even in your dreams, you bitch.

Morgan could barely keep her hands from forming fists, and she fought to keep her rage and horror from her expression.

Think, damn it, think. What would Nainie tell me to do?

Every faery story she had ever read or heard indicated that she had to step carefully with these powerful beings. However, Nainie had said there were a few things that the Tylwyth Teg respected, and one of them was mortal generosity. Morgan hoped like hell it was true...

"Well fought, my lady. Your cleverness is exceeded only by your beauty," said Morgan, bowing slightly, her words deliberately courteous and deferential although she felt neither. She'd rather be pulling every glossy white hair from that creature's skull than waste time being polite. "This man belongs to me, but perhaps I could make you a gift of something else. Please come inside, and we'll discuss it over tea. You've had such a long journey. Allow me to offer you hospitality."

The fae's glittering smile turned hesitant, a mixture of curiosity and confusion behind it. "You would invite me into your home?" she asked.

A small figure suddenly dropped from the loft in a shower of straw. "They're not deserving of hospitality," Ranyon shouted. "The Tylwyth Teg don't understand kindness or courtesy or even decency."

The fae sniffed. "What would an ugly little ellyll know of such lofty things?"

"There was a time when the Wild Hunt would mete out justice upon the greedy, the slothful, and the heartless," continued Ranyon, standing beside Morgan and pointing a twiggy finger at the fae. His Blue Jays cap had a cocky tilt to it, as if it too defied the Fair Ones. "And now you're naught but bullies."

Morgan made a subtle shushing motion with her hand at Rhys's eye level. "My offer stands," she said to the fae. "It's the least I can do. This rough stable is not a fit place for the Fair Ones. My house is humble, but it is clean, and you are welcome within its walls."

"There is still a matter of balance, of payment and satisfaction," declared the female, and her otherworldly gaze sharpened on Morgan. "Surely, you are not disputing my right to this man?" The fae snapped a length of silvery rope from a hidden pocket and dropped it on the black furry heap beside her. Of its own accord, the rope slid around the neck of the inert black mastiff and dragged him to his feet. The enormous dog shook off his grogginess and erupted into blood-chilling snarls, baring his long fangs and lunging at his luminous captor. She didn't move an inch. A cruel smile quirked her perfect lips as the silver rope yanked the animal back and forced him up on his hind

legs, up and up, until the snarling jaws were level with her flawless face—yet neither teeth nor claws could reach her. “I think he looks better like this,” remarked the fae. “Don’t you?”

Morgan’s heart squeezed hard enough to hurt as her eyes witnessed what her heart had finally been willing to believe. Rhys had indeed been Rhyswr, the dog who saved her life and whose disappearance she had mourned. The knowledge did her little good now, however. All of them were in imminent danger, and she had to choose her words carefully. “I desire to show respect to the Tylwyth Teg, yet as a healer, I cannot violate my sacred oath to protect mortal life, be it animal or human. Therefore, I cannot allow this man to be taken. In his place, I offer any and all of my belongings freely. My truck, my house, my farm...whatever possession you want.”

“No!” Ranyon stood squarely in front of Morgan. “Have the Tylwyth Teg grown so poor that they must need rob mortals? Are ya thieves now as well as tyrants?”

“Shut up, Ranyon!” she whispered through clenched teeth. To offend the Fair Ones could get both of them changed into dogs, or worse.

Far worse

, if Nainie’s stories were any indication. Morgan studied the shining being before her, unable to discern her mood. Was she truly angry or just enjoying the drama? Nainie had once said the Tylwyth Teg suffered from eternal boredom, and mortals were one of their few sources of entertainment.

“What need have we of your silly possessions?” The fae gave a dismissive wave. “Your little house? Your tiny piece of land? Shall we leave the splendor of our kingdom beneath the hills to till the soil above it?”

“It is all I have to offer,” said Morgan, and bowed again for good measure.

The female laughed, a cold slurry of crystal shards in arctic waters. “My dear foolish mortal, there are much better things to barter with. What will you give up for this man? Your beauty perhaps? Your youth?”

In a move too fast to follow, Ranyon leapt astride Fred and charged the fae with Morgan’s poker in his hands like a lance. His target leapt aside, laughing, but the sound was abruptly cut short. The elyll must have worked some magic upon the iron tool because it had sliced open the female’s upper thigh as he passed. Glistening droplets of pale-blue blood flew as the fae threw out her hand toward Ranyon. The hapless elyll was hurled from Fred’s back and slammed against a wall with such force that the thick wooden planks cracked from the impact of the tiny body. He slid to the floor in a boneless heap, and Morgan was certain he was dead. Rhys, still bound by the silver rope to an upright position that strained his canine form, howled long and loud.

Damn it.

She held the tears inside—it wasn’t the time for them. Nothing was working, and the situation didn’t seem to be following any of the stories. Now she was facing a truly pissed-off fae, alone, with no idea of what to do. She could see the female’s smirk of triumph, knew the creature believed she had won. Morgan tried to keep her own face

impassive even as her thoughts whirled frantically. She rested a shaking hand on Fred's broad head, grateful he had returned to sit in front of her. Grateful he'd been *able*

to do so, unlike Rhys or poor Ranyon. How long would it be before the fae tired of playing and simply destroyed them all with a flick of her elegant fingers?

What would Nainie do?

Morgan grasped the pendant through the material of her shirt for comfort—and suddenly she knew she had one more card to play.

“I would offer a gift to Queen Gwenhidw,” she declared loudly, hoping not only that the faery queen of Nainie's stories was still on the throne, but that she was pronouncing the name right.

The female snorted. “What dirty little trinket could she *possibly* want from you?”

“In exchange for Rhys's freedom, for a promise that the Tylwyth Teg will consider all debts satisfied, I would give the queen *this*.”

Morgan drew the pendant from its hiding place. She kept the long chain around her neck, but held the carved stone medallion up in front of her. In the living light of the fae, it began to glow. In moments, its fiery blue light had eclipsed hers utterly.

“The Sigil!” hissed the female as she slowly sank to her knees, her gaze riveted on the medallion. The mocking smile had completely disappeared from her beautiful face. The silver rope she had used to bind the black dog slackened, and the great creature shook itself free. For a split second, Morgan thought he was going to savage his adversary, but instead, he bounded over to Morgan and planted himself squarely in front of her, alongside Fred.

“I see you recognize this,” said Morgan, pretending she knew what the hell it was, although she hadn't the faintest notion.