

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (37 page)

A gasp came from her left, and she saw that the fae she had hit with the skillet had half risen from the straw. He too was staring at the medallion as if hypnotized by it. “Good lady, the Sigil has been lost to the royal house for many mortal lifetimes.” His voice was weak but full of wonder. “It is the symbol of their power, the seal of the realm itself. How came you by it?”

“It has been guarded by my family for generations. My grandmother gave it into my keeping.”

“It has been
stolen

by your family!” The female pointed a long delicate finger at Morgan, and her words fairly dripped with venom. “It is obvious now that your ancestor used her friendship with the queen in order to rob us of our greatest treasure! You have brought certain death upon yourself and a curse upon—”

“I think not.”

The new voice startled them all. Morgan glanced around until she spotted a pulsing bead of silver light hovering in midair. The light grew rapidly until a glittering being appeared in the midst of it. Both of the faeries quickly pressed their faces to the floor.

Instinctively, Morgan knelt too. “Your Majesty,” she breathed. She had thought the faeries beautiful, but their appearance did not compare with the unearthly splendor of the queen of the Tylwyth Teg. Her flowing robes were both iridescent and luminous. They changed color so rapidly that to human sight, they were all colors at once. It was her face, however, framed by intricate braids and loops of silvery hair, which captured the eye and held it. It might have been made of exquisite porcelain, lit from within. She glowed, and her exotic eyes were unexpectedly kind as they turned to the mortal kneeling in the stable.

“How lovely to meet a descendant of my dear friend Aylwen. We used to have such fun together. I am very pleased that you have taken good care of the Sigil, Morgan Edwards. I had given it to Aylwen for safekeeping.”

“Why would you give something so important to a human?” Morgan blurted.

The queen laughed prettily, with surprising warmth. “You are as curious as she was. There was an intrigue designed to usurp the throne. Had the traitors gained the Sigil, they might have succeeded. Aylwen smuggled it out of the kingdom for me, and while many searched for the Sigil, none of the fae suspected it might be in mortal hands. Your family has performed a valuable service to me, and I am in your debt.”

There was a gasp from the female, who was still pressing her forehead to the floor. Queen Gwenhidw didn't spare her a glance although her mouth quirked. "Yes, Daeria, you heard correctly. I am indebted to a mortal."

"But she is
nothing

!" hissed the fae, glancing up. "Humans are beneath us."

The royal smile disappeared. "In that, you are quite wrong. You defy me, as always, Daeria, and worse, you now defy our laws. You have summoned the Wild Hunt and taken them outside of our dominion, upsetting the balance between realms and causing chaos among innocents. Since you favor the Hunt so much, I decree that you shall join it."

A look of horror crossed Daeria's face. She tried to speak, but her words were choked off as her body began to writhe and spasm, as limbs reshaped and reformed. In a matter of seconds, the beautiful fae's perfect features were gone, and a lean white hound stood where she had been.

From outside, a mournful horn sounded, as long and low as a winter wolf's howl. The thunder and lightning ceased and the wind fell away until all was still and silent.

"The Hunt returns to its rightful place," said the queen. "And
your

place henceforth is wherever it goes." The white dog fled the barn as if pursued by demons. Queen Gwenhidw turned her gaze to the other faery, who visibly trembled, without looking up from his prostrate position. "I see that you yet respect my authority, Tyne. To date, you have chosen your companions poorly, but perhaps without Daeria's influence, you could learn to do better. I will have more to say to you later. For now, take the bodies of the fallen back to our realm, and do not return to this place again."

"As you command," he said and vanished. The dead fae disappeared as well.

Morgan removed the necklace at once and held it out to the queen. "I'm sorry. I didn't know this belonged to you. I had only known it as my grandmother's necklace."

Instead of taking it, the queen grasped Morgan's hand and drew her to her feet. Rhys immediately placed his canine body in front of Morgan protectively, his eyes wary and watchful. Fred was at the ready as well.

"I will take the Sigil after accounts are balanced," said the queen. "What may I give you in return, Morgan Edwards?"

"Rhys's freedom."

"This is all you ask?"

Morgan nodded, hoping against hope that the queen would agree. The faery ruler appeared benevolent, but appearances could be deceiving, particularly when dealing with the Tylwyth Teg. And Morgan had no doubt that this being was far more dangerous than those who had threatened her earlier and the entire Wild Hunt combined.

“I could fill this building with wealth until gold and silver poured from the loft overhead. All for you. You could be famous on every continent, beautiful and sought after until the end of an extended life.”

“Thanks, but Rhys is worth far more to me.”

Queen Gwenhidw smiled. “True love always is. You shall have what you seek.”

The monarch placed a hand on Fred’s head and scratched his ears. “You’re a handsome fellow, but I think Morgan has already made you happier than anything I can do for you.” Her hand then rested on Rhys’s broad black head.

“We have not treated you well, have we?” the queen asked Rhys. “I cannot change that, but I can release you.”

In an instant, the black dog was gone, and Rhys stood, tall and strong, in its place. The wound in his shoulder had vanished as well.

“Thank you, your Majesty,” said Morgan and bowed. Rhys inclined his head slightly as well but said nothing.

“You have no thanks for me?” asked Queen Gwenhidw.

“Two millennia of service seems gratitude enough,” he replied.

Morgan was horrified, but the queen simply laughed. “Well said, and so it is.”

The ruler put out her hand—the long, slender fingers were adorned with many rings that chimed together—and Morgan placed the necklace in it. There was a pang in her heart as she did so. It was still Nainie’s necklace to her, but her grandmother would no doubt have approved of the transaction.

TWENTY-FOUR

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he necklace vanished from the queen’s palm and reappeared around her willowy neck. Every jewel glowed vibrantly in its silver setting, and the medallion shone as brightly as Queen Gwenhidw herself. “No one from our realm will trouble either of you again,” she said. “And I will do my utmost to set to rights all that has been disrupted by Daeria. However, I will reserve the right to send gifts to you whenever I please, in remembrance of Aylwen. I have missed her sorely these long years.”

The monarch still smiled, but there was wistfulness behind it. “You look so very much like her, my dear Morgan. I felt your presence the moment you set foot on our island soil, and I so hope you will forgive my little deception during your stay. It was a great pleasure to pretend I was with Aylwen again, and a comfort to my heart.”

For a moment, Morgan saw not the queen’s face but that of the older woman who had been her delightful traveling companion in Wales. Her mouth fell open. “Gwen? Omigosh, it was

you

all along!" No wonder Morgan had been unable to contact her after the trip. "I missed you. I tried and tried to phone. I—we—well, we just

have

to do a road trip together the next time I'm in Wales."

"I shall look forward to it, my dear." The queen gave a long, slow wink and a girlish grin, then assumed her own perfect features before vanishing completely.

Darkness rushed back into the stable as if it had been a tide held back, and Rhys held Morgan tightly. She clung in return, until she could stop the sudden shaking that had overtaken her. "I'm sorry," she stammered. "I don't know what's wrong with me!"

"It happens to some after battle. You've nothing to be sorry about. You were brave as a lioness and clever as well." He put a finger under her chin, tipped her face up, and kissed her tenderly. "I'd sworn to protect you. But I think 'twas you who did most of the protecting tonight. You've freed me twice: first from the collar and now from the Fair Ones themselves."

"But we lost Ranyon," she said. "He took on Daeria all by himself."

Rhys rested his forehead on hers. "He was a brave friend and a wise one. I'll not relish telling Leo what became of him."

"You'll not be telling Leo anything of the sort," came an indignant voice from behind them. "And I'll thank ya not to bury me afore I'm dead!"

Morgan felt her way to the wall switches and flipped on the overhead fixtures. After all the light that had bathed the barn's interior in the last hour, it was as if she'd struck a match, not turned on a pair of one-hundred-watt bulbs. She blinked in the yellowed light that seemed both bright and dim at the same time, and persuaded her eyes to focus just as the ellyll emerged from one of the stalls.

Morgan and Rhys rushed over to him. Miraculously, he seemed none the worse for wear, but he was much more concerned with the state of his prized Blue Jays cap than with

answering their questions. Several shards of wood impaled the bright logo. The bill was cracked and half torn from the crown. He cradled the sorry remains in his twiggy hands, shaking his head over it.

"We'll get you another hat," said Morgan, patting the ellyll gently on the shoulder as much to reassure herself that he was all right as to comfort him.

Gwenhidw must have healed him.

She glanced over at the wall, the cracked and broken planks marking where Ranyon had impacted it, and shuddered. There was no other explanation for the ellyll's condition. By rights, his little body should have looked far worse than the hat.

The ellyll sniffed loudly. "That's kind of ya, good lady, but this is the one that dear Leo gave me."

"Then we'll give it a place of honor," she said softly.

“Morgan! Come over here!” Rhys was in Lucy’s stall, and Morgan’s heart sank. She would never forget the terrifying sight of the Wild Hunt amid the unnatural storm. If Lucy had been forced to run with it, what condition was she in now?

Morgan leaned in to look where Rhys was pointing, her heart in her throat. And then her knees gave way, and she was sitting in the straw, staring.

There was nothing wrong with the horse. Nothing at all.

Rhys brought her the big flashlight from the toolbox on the wall, and she examined the horse’s legs closely, running her hands over what used to be dozens of ghastly, deep gashes held together only by her own sutures. Instead, there was nothing but silvery gray hair over smooth, unbroken skin.

“Gwenhidw did this,” said Morgan in awe. “That’s—” She nearly jumped out of her skin as her long-forgotten cell phone rang in her front jeans pocket. Fishing it out hurriedly, she thumbed it open, and two things struck her at once. One, that it was barely 5:30 in the morning. And two, it was Jay. Hoping it was a clinic emergency and not worse news, she put the phone to her ear as Rhys put his hands on her shoulders.

“Good morning,” said Jay.

“Don’t
good morning
me—is Leo okay?”

“Better than okay. Walking around, visiting with his kids, and complaining about the food.” There was a pause. “He wants to know if—never mind, just put Ranyon or Rhys on the phone. He won’t be happy till he talks to one of them in person.”

Morgan grinned and handed the phone to Ranyon. She wasn’t sure he could hold it, but his twiggy fingers were far more flexible than they looked. In fact, the elyll settled himself on the grain bin as if getting comfortable for a lengthy conversation.

“Leo’s all right,” she said to Rhys.

“By all the gods, the queen has indeed set things to rights.” The mare stamped impatiently and whickered. “And now Lucy wants to try out her legs.” Rhys led the horse to the yard with Morgan and Fred at his side.

The couple stood with arms around each other watching the great horse prance and trot, buck and caper, as the big dog ran playfully beside her. The moonlight turned the mare’s dapple-gray coat to silver, and for a moment, Morgan thought Lucy looked like a faery horse. Perhaps she was.

Rhys took a deep breath and released it. “I’ll not be looking over my shoulder for the fae anymore. ’Tis a good feeling. A very good feeling.” He nuzzled Morgan’s hair, his deep voice rumbling pleasantly in her ear. “I’ve a mind to sample you here under the stars.”

“I’ve a mind to let you. But Lludd of the Silver Hand is watching and so is his dog.” She pointed up at the sky and grinned.

“I’m certain they would approve.”

“And

our

dog and our horse and our friend are here as well.”

“I’m certain they would also approve.”

“Probably, but let’s go see Leo first.”

Rhys kissed the back of her neck, making her shiver and her breasts tighten. “Aye, well, we can tell him our news then,” he said.

“That we defeated the fae?”

“That we’re going to marry.”