

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (7 page)

Transporting the dog proved to be easier than she expected. She'd been afraid that the step up into the van would be difficult for the injured animal, but she'd forgotten how tall he was. Although his wound made him slow, Rhyswr walked into the van almost effortlessly and sat calmly with his nose at her shoulder as she drove to her home in a rural area north of the city limits. When she'd bought the run-down farm two years ago, she'd wondered if she was making a mistake. The commute would be long, and while the sprawling old house was in much better shape than the barns and outbuildings, it had still required a great deal of upgrading. But the farm had rapidly become her sanctuary. And for a king-size canine, it would be heaven on earth.

Morgan pulled into the long, winding driveway and was soon standing in the grass with her new four-legged roommate. She'd looped a leash around the heavy metal collar, but it wasn't necessary. The mastiff looked to her for his cues, moved when she moved, his great head level with her waist. "Well, Rhyswr, this is the place," she said as she unlocked the front door. "But I'm sure not going to carry you over the threshold." She stepped inside and held the door open. Here, the dog hesitated. He lowered his head and peered inside, uncertain.

"Come on, boy, it's okay. You can come in," Morgan coaxed. "You belong here. This is your new home. Come on home, Rhyswr."

The great animal chuffed and stepped forward. But as the dog cleared the doorway, the air was filled with a bell-like clanging that made Morgan cringe and cover her ears. When the metallic tones finally died away, the silvery collar lay on the floor. "Omigod, all I did was tie a leash around it!" Kneeling, she tried to pick it up and was surprised to find that many of the finely woven coils had shattered. She was staring at the broken links in her hands when an enormous wet pink washcloth blocked her vision. "Hey!"

His tail wagging furiously, the huge black creature was almost puppylike in his sudden desire to wash her face with his tongue. "Stop that. Yuck! No licking, *no licking*

!" It was a challenge for Morgan to regain her footing—not just because the dog was so big and kept knocking her off-balance but because she was laughing so hard. Finally, she braced herself against a wall and gripped the dog's wrinkly muzzle with both hands. She

didn't have a hope of holding those giant jaws closed, but at least only her fingers were getting wet. Finally, the dog got the message and settled for nuzzling instead.

"Feels good to have that heavy thing off your neck, doesn't it?" She rubbed behind the dog's ears as he wagged his tail in apparent agreement. "Let's get this cleaned up, and then I'll give you a tour of the place."

Despite his size, Rhyswr wasn't clumsy in the least. Morgan had expected a bull-in-a-china-shop scenario, with visions of him bumping into her furniture as his great black tail swept things off tables and shelves. After all, that would be par for the course with most large dogs. However, nothing of the sort happened, even though Rhyswr was clearly pleased to be with Morgan. She could almost swear he was being deliberately careful, a quality unknown among most canines—their enthusiasm got the better of them most of the time.

She put together a salad at the kitchen counter for dinner, with the big mastiff sitting quietly next to her. He could easily see over the counter—and reach everything on it if he'd been so inclined. Instead, he was perfectly well behaved, happy to simply listen as she talked. That was a surprise to her too: how pleasant it was to have someone to talk to at the end of the day. She could definitely get used to it. "I always thought that being a vet meant I wouldn't have time for a dog of my own, that I couldn't offer it a good life. I keep pretty long hours—guess I should have warned you about that."

The black dog simply thumped his tail on the floor.

"I'm glad it's okay with you," she continued, as she pulled up a barstool to the counter and ate her salad. "I'm thinking you should come to work with me as much as possible. Unless I'm out on a farm call or something. I just don't want you to be alone all day, Rhyswr. I want you to be happy."

The dog laid his enormous head on her thigh, and she rubbed his soft ears. Half an hour later, his head was in the same position as they sat on the couch and watched the news on TV together. Morgan had always loved animals, but Rhyswr had brought something new to her home, as if it was suddenly filled with life.

A house is not a home without a dog.

Or a cat or a bird or a goldfish. She didn't understand how it worked, although she'd heard pet owners speak of the phenomenon many times. But now she was feeling it. Strange—she loved her house and had never noticed it lacking anything before. Now, because of the dog, there was somehow
more

Usually she did paperwork, caught up on reading veterinary medical journals, and did other tasks before falling into bed. Tonight, Morgan made popcorn—including a very small bowl that she left plain to share with Rhyswr—and put in a DVD. His behavior was impeccable. He didn't jump up or get excited about the popcorn (and she'd seen plenty of dogs do backflips for it). Instead, he gently took pieces from her fingers as she offered them. The only time she had to tell the big mastiff to sit down was when he tried to lick the tears from her face during the sad parts of the movie. "You make a pretty perfect companion," she said to him after the credits rolled. "You didn't even complain that it was a chick flick."

At ten, she almost changed her mind about having him sleep in the laundry room.
Almost.

If it hadn't been for her certain knowledge of the volume of his snoring, she would have given in and let him sleep in her room.

The thick, comfy bed she'd made for him made the spacious laundry room look small. She hoped he'd be comfortable.

Rhyswr obediently sat in the middle of the bedding, but his eyes looked alarmed as she went to leave the room. Morgan put her arms around his big neck and hugged him. "It's just for tonight. If you really hate it, we'll think of something else tomorrow, okay?"

Rhyswr thumped his tail and lay down, and Morgan headed off to her room. She knew she needed her sleep, needed every minute of it that she could get, but still it took all her willpower to leave the dog in the laundry room.

As she curled up under her blankets, she wondered why she hadn't allowed herself to get a dog sooner. Her last thought before falling asleep was that she'd obviously been waiting for the right one to come along.

He'd known that the shattering of the faery-forged collar would summon the attention of the Tylwyth Teg, but Rhys hadn't expected messengers so soon. Ancient beyond counting, beautiful beyond imagining, two beings stood in the room with him and banished the darkness with their living light. He squinted up at the Fair Ones, recognizing Tyne and Daeria of the queen's own court, and waited.

Tyne studied the fragments of the collar that Morgan had placed in a box on the laundry table, then placed a single shard in the waiting palm of his consort. Daeria simply closed her delicate, long-fingered hand around it without taking her iridescent eyes off the large dog before her.

"What a surprise you've given us." Her voice struck Rhys's sensitive ears like hundreds of tiny bells chiming at once. Alluring, yet there was an underlying menace, darkness lurking beneath the light. The sound danced up and down his spine, and it was all he could do not to shiver. As a dog, he could make no reply, but none was wanted. "The queen was most impressed by the news. No grim has ever escaped his collar, and certainly no barghest has ever traveled so far. It's provided fascinating conversation throughout the court."

That could be good or bad. The Tylwyth Teg were immortal beings, but the burden of living for endless millennia was tedium. It was one reason that the Fair Ones tended to play terrible pranks upon mortals. Like bored children, they sprang upon the unwary, seeking diversion. So it had been when a weary Celtic warrior turned reluctant gladiator had fought his way to freedom at last. Wounded and near death, pursued by his former captors, he'd blundered straight into the territory of the Tylwyth Teg in the steep hills northwest of Isca Silurum...

"We came to see how this was done," Tyne chimed in. "And now it is apparent that a mortal has had a hand in this. A most unusual mortal, in that she has beckoned you and actually sought you out instead of avoiding you. Offered you food and dressed your

wounds. Each unselfish deed has weakened the links of our spell, and now the spell is unmade. This has never happened, not in all the ages of time.” He smiled, and it was like the sun in the high arctic. Bright but without real warmth.

“You’ve upset the balance of things. While it’s true that harmony was restored when you purchased this woman’s mortal life with your immortal one,” continued Daeria, “*we* remain unsatisfied. And therein you have provided the court with a very great puzzle. We wish your continued servitude, yet this mortal has managed to purchase your life with her unusual devotion. You are hers. Of course, *her* enslavement would provide redress for her interference.”

Rhys knew the game. He’d seen it countless times. They were baiting him, hoping for a reaction. He dared not give them one, forced himself to appear disinterested, as if Morgan’s fate didn’t matter to him. The couple waited, but he simply stared at them steadily.

Tyne shrugged finally. “The queen—”

“The *queen* revealed that she knew this mortal’s ancestor of twenty generations past.” Daeria delivered this tidbit with relish, like someone revealing juicy gossip. “Some say they were friends and the queen permitted the woman to visit the faery court freely.”

“And leave as she chose,” said Tyne.

Rhys knew better than most how unusual that was. No human entered or left the royal court save by the will of the Fair Ones. He’d seen many hapless mortals there over the centuries, some invited, most captured. Like him, they were forced to provide service or amusement for the Tylwyth Teg. Few ever left. If there had once been a mortal woman who was an actual friend to the queen, he hadn’t noticed. But then, he only ever saw the powerful monarch when she was in the throne room. Most of the time she did not deign to grace the chattering court with her presence.

“I suppose it was because of her blood,” explained Daeria, ignoring the glare of her consort, who clearly wanted to tell some of the tale. “There was a silver thread of fae blood in her mortal veins and in all her female descendants since. Royal fae blood. Including the woman who has showed you such uncommon kindness.”

Tyne nodded. “That is true. Though she is mortal, she is of us.”

There was nothing he could do—even with a canine face, Rhys couldn’t hide his astonishment at such news. He saw pleasure spring behind their otherworldly eyes, pleasure in knowing that they had managed to surprise him. He could picture them returning to their hidden land beneath the Welsh hills, delighting all with the gossip they brought.

That foolish warrior didn’t even know that the woman was fae

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No, but he
did

know that Morgan was nothing like the coldhearted creatures before him.

Tyne put his hand on Daeria's arm, and she waved an irritated hand as if giving him permission to speak. He made a slight bow, not to her but to Rhys. "In deference to that bloodline and to an old friendship, the queen has made her appearance in the throne room for the first time since the king expired."

The king had not expired, thought Rhys. Having witnessed death in every form possible, he knew that only the sick and the weak could be said to

expire

, releasing their last breath and having not the strength to take another. The king of the Fair Ones had not only resisted his death by iron blades in the hands of power-seeking traitors but had fought to purchase time for his wife to cast an enchantment that bound the murderers. He saved her life but died mere seconds before she could save his.

"Her Supreme Highness, Ruler of the Nine Realms, called upon the entire court to witness not one but two declarations. One, that Morgan Edwards is henceforth

eithriedig

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She had immunity? Rhys's control nearly slipped again. She had been afforded an extremely rare protection—at least from those who dared not disobey their remaining monarch. His Morgan was essentially safeguarded from all faery malice, from simple pranks to spells and violence. With otherworldly threats thus removed, Rhys was confident that he could protect her from all else.

"The court was appalled. Such a valuable gift to be bestowed upon an insignificant mortal." Daeria spoke the last word with a hiss of disgust.

Her companion frowned at her but continued. "The second declaration is that the Tylwyth Teg will relinquish our claim upon you, dark grim, until such time that this mortal woman relinquishes hers by the power of three. You are ours no more—"

"—until

then

," finished Daeria, and there was no mistaking the threat.

The Fair Ones vanished, and Rhys was alone in the dark, relieved yet disturbed.

Until then.

Until a time when he no longer belonged to Morgan. The idea was surprisingly painful. He'd have to make sure that didn't happen. He'd be a model dog, a devoted servant, a perfect animal companion and protector. She'd have no reason to ever make him leave.