

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (9 page)

Nainie Jones had often spoken of her childhood, told of her mother leaving milk and bread on the back step for the Tylwyth Teg. It was an offering, a gift of hospitality, she said, so they

wouldn't play tricks on the family. Morgan gripped the hoe harder to keep her hands from trembling, yet she couldn't help but be fascinated.

"You cannot enter their territory without permission or payment," he continued. "I had nothing to offer when they discovered me. Not even my life, as I was dying. I thought they would finish me, but instead they healed me. And that was their prank. Because then they changed me, so they could take their payment in servitude."

Rhys—if that was even his real name—either believed what he was saying or was a prime candidate for an Oscar. Because try as Morgan might, she couldn't see any evidence that he was lying. He had to be crazy then, but everything about the whole situation was insane. After all, she was standing in her front yard in her pajamas, holding a naked man at the point of a garden hoe. She'd taken assertive action when she'd seen him lying in the grass, assuming he was drunk or something. Well, she'd gotten the upper hand all right. Now what was she supposed to do with the guy? She couldn't keep him there indefinitely. "If I let you up, will you behave? Because I swear I'll beat you with this if you so much as look at me wrong."

"I will not hurt you. I swear it on my life."

It would have to do. "Okay. You can get up." She stepped back, clutching the hoe's handle, ready to swing and swing

hard

if need be. The man rolled away from her and got to his feet, his movements deliberately slow.

Omigod, he's tall.

Morgan felt something deep inside her turn over in pure female appreciation. When he'd been on the ground, she'd been focused on his face. Now, her eyes quickly scanned the strong arms and muscled chest, then followed the dark line of hair that traveled down his taut belly and fanned

around a very promising cock. She snapped her gaze back up to his face, feeling her cheekbones heat and her body thrum. It was embarrassing, not so much that he was naked but that she was reacting so strongly to him. It was the stupid dreams; it had to be those stupid, sexy, wonderful dreams that were sending her hormones wild. Morgan cleared her throat with difficulty, fought to focus.

Suddenly she noticed something she hadn't before. The man's arms and shoulders showed at least a dozen scars. There were more on his torso, some on his legs. The scars were white, wounds that had healed long ago. They were also curiously wide, as

if they'd never been sutured. What the hell had happened to him? An accident? She prayed that he wasn't one of those troubled souls who felt compelled to cut themselves. Worse—had he hurt the great black mastiff?

"I want to know what you've done with my dog."

He looked surprised. "It's me, surely. You called me Rhyswr, but my name is Rhys."

"No, I called my
dog

Rhyswr. And there's no way you could know his name unless you've been watching me." Had the stranger been hiding in the woods last night, spying on her as she walked around the yard with the dog? Or had he seen her with the dog at the clinic and followed her home? Her grip tightened on the garden hoe. Maybe letting the guy get up had been a really bad idea. "Look, I want to know where my dog is right now before I call the police."

He ran a hand through his dark hair then pinched the bridge of his nose as if thinking. "I know not how to explain. You'll think me mad."

"Too late, buddy. Goes with sleeping in a stranger's house and standing around naked."

He flushed slightly, and those golden eyes darkened, but he made no effort to cover himself. "A warrior goes into battle naked, as does a gladiator. But we are not at war, and this is not your custom. Does it offend you that I have no clothes?"

"I'm not offended so much as pissed off that you broke into my house, scared the hell out of me, and lost my dog."

"Your dog is not missing."

"Good. Where is he?"

"I am the black dog you befriended. When they found me, the Tylwyth Teg were amused by this—" he pointed at his tattooed collarbone "—and thought I would make them an excellent hound. I've been a grim ever since, a barghest, bound in service to the Fair Ones for all time. Forced to wear a collar that was forged in faery fire, crafted by faery hand. There was no hope of escape for me until you unmade the spell with your kindness."

Holy crap. The guy was a loony after all. "Stay there. Right there. Understand? Don't make a move." Morgan brandished the hoe as she sidled over to the front door, then dove through it, slamming and locking it after her. Ran to the phone in the kitchen, snatched up the cordless receiver, then dashed through the house to the back door. It was locked. A quick check of the windows showed that they were securely latched as well. How on earth had the man gotten inside?

The sensible side of her said to call 911.

Now, right now!

Yet strangely, she found herself reluctant to do that. Instead, some inkling was fluttering at her brain like a bright luna moth before a window. She strained to discern what it was

but came away with only the same vague sense that she knew this man. Intimately. Cared about him.

“That’s ridiculous,” she said aloud. Obviously she was thinking with her hormones, reacting to a fantasy, to a
dream

for

heaven’s sake. The guy might be a serial killer. Homicidal maniacs could be attractive, couldn’t they? So could compulsive liars. But what purpose would a grown man have in claiming to be a dog? Did he really think she’d fall for something so outlandish? Maybe he had a fetish for veterinarians...

Good grief, why did she have to think of the word
fetish

with the most attractive man she’d ever met standing naked in her yard? Of course, that attraction was beginning to wane in the wake of the fantastical story he’d told her. She found herself feeling a little sorry for him. Maybe he had missed his medication or had a reaction to something he ate or drank. Maybe he’d suffered a head injury that had left him out of touch with reality—after all,

something

had happened to him to give him all those scars. Yet, he didn’t seem to be dangerous. If he was, he’d already had plenty of opportunity to do whatever he wanted to her. Yet, he hadn’t laid a hand on her as she lay asleep in her bed. Hadn’t threatened her in the least.

What to do? The truth was, she didn’t want to have Rhys arrested, didn’t want to press charges or cause trouble for him. But Morgan was equally certain there was nothing she could do to help him except to report him as the lost soul he obviously was.

I could just mention that he was wandering my property and skip the part about finding him in my house.

Maybe there was a missing persons report on him. Maybe someone would recognize him and take him home.

As she peeked through the curtains with the phone in her hand, waiting for the police dispatcher to pick up, she realized there was

one

thing she did know about the naked stranger in her yard.

He had, without doubt, the finest butt on the planet.

SIX

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e was in a cell again. There was no window from which to see the sky but at least there was light. It was clean, unlike the dank and stinking hole Rhys had been forced to live in at Isca Silurum, and it had a plumbing system that the very elite of Rome would envy. Fresh water was available to him at all times. Food—

good

food, not leavings—had been brought to him. Strange that such luxury was given to prisoners. He'd been given clothes too. Although he didn't care for the garish orange color, they were clean and smelled of strong soap.

But a cell was still a cell. He was a man again yet once more a prisoner. Surely the Fair Ones had planned it thus, tantalizing him with freedom, then yanking it away just as he allowed himself to rejoice. He could almost hear their cold, crystalline laughter, devoid of true mirth. Yet the long night brought no other worldly visitors to mock him.

Strangely, his captors didn't mock him either. They'd spoken briefly but politely when they brought him clothes and each time they brought him food, and he had thanked them for their great kindness. They looked at him oddly then, and he didn't know what he had said wrong. He knew the language fluently—had come to know many languages over the centuries—but of course he hadn't interacted with anyone as a dog. And this country was new to him. Perhaps he had missed something, some custom or nuance of behavior.

Rhys snorted. Obviously he'd missed more than that or he wouldn't be in a cage again. He had committed no crime that he knew of, yet Morgan had clearly expected him to go with the man she had summoned. The blond man had the bearing of a soldier, but Rhys was far larger and more powerful. He could have stood his ground and simply refused to go. Yet to please Morgan, he had automatically done what she wanted as if he truly was her obedient pet.

The longer he was in human form, the less that subservient role appealed to him...Rhys was certain of his vow to protect her, however. He just couldn't figure out how to fulfill it. He'd sworn to stay with Morgan—yet she didn't want him with her. A day and a half had passed, but he didn't bother questioning how long his sentence was.

After all, in his experience, once a prisoner, always a prisoner.

But other prisoners came

and went

. He listened carefully to what few words were spoken between the men and their captors but gained no clues. Where were they going? Only the elderly man in the closest cell remained. The officer had called him Mr. Waterson and treated him like an old friend rather than a prisoner. He'd been drunk when he was led into the cell, but the officer simply helped him to lie down and covered him gently with a blanket. He'd snored all night, but Rhys had heard far worse sounds.

There was a morning meal, everything wrapped in white paper again. Even the cup was paper. Tastes. Textures. Colors. Rhys reveled in every detail until the last crumb was finished. He was startled by a deep, gravelly voice.

"I got an extra hash brown here. You want it, son?"

Reverting to old habits, Rhys hadn't yet spoken to his neighbor. He had never talked to other prisoners, not because it was forbidden but because it was better not to know them. It was all too likely he'd meet them in the arena. "You offer your food?" he asked, wondering if it was a joke.

“Food and I aren’t real good friends in the morning. You get old like me, your stomach gets testy. I’ve had more than enough.”

Rhys took the proffered potato patty through the bars. “My thanks.”

“Name’s Leo. Haven’t seen you around here before. First arrest?”

“Rhys. I have not been in this prison before.”

Leo laughed. “This here’s just the local jail, son. Prison’s the Big House, and it’s for nastier fish than us. Although I see you’re in peels, so maybe you’re a bit badder than I think.”

“Peels?”

“You

are

wet behind the ears.

Peels. Oranges.

You’re wearing prison gear. Where’s your clothes?”

“I have none.”

Leo’s shaggy, white eyebrows went up. “Well, that explains what

you’re

in for. Me, I drink a little too much now and then. Can’t get my old gray ass home sometimes.

Drunk in public.

But not

disorderly

, not since I was a marine at least. Used to be a bit of a hothead in my younger years.

Funny how age cools you down, makes you think things through.” He laughed again.

“Can’t remember stuff worth a shit though.”

Rhys considered that. His newly restored body was still strong, but was he any wiser than he had been the last time he walked upright? He remembered all the centuries in between, however, and for a moment he envied Leo and his forgetfulness.

Rhys could recall every single face that had recoiled from the sight of the black dog, every hapless mortal over the endless years whose misfortune it had been to witness the grim’s appearance.

Finally Officer Richards, the man who had taken him from Morgan’s house (in a

car

, a fine conveyance although Rhys didn’t care for the enclosed feeling), came and stood in front of his cell. The blond man was nearly as tall as Rhys, but his frame was narrow and wiry. His eyes conveyed a great deal of intelligence, however, and Rhys had no doubt that they took in every detail.

“Mr. Reese, I can’t keep you here any longer. You have no record, and you’re not being charged with any crime at this time, although I would advise you to keep your clothes on in the future. I’m concerned that you may have a health problem, however, and I’d like a

doctor to have a look at you. It would have to be voluntary, however. I can't compel you to see him when I release you."

Rhys blinked. "You are...letting me go?"

"Have you committed a crime I don't know about?"

He shook his head slowly.

"Good. Will you allow me to take you to a doctor?"

"I have no injuries, no need of a physician," he said carefully. Rhys didn't want to offend the man, but he could see no reason to go to a healer.

"I had a feeling you'd say something like that. All right, then. You'll need to change your clothes." Officer Richards opened the door and handed Rhys a green sack. "We can't have you running around looking like an escaped prisoner. Dr. Edwards called, had some things put aside for you at Ellison's Hardware on her own dime, so I picked them up. You'll have some extra socks and briefs to take with you because they don't sell those separately, of course. There's a comb and a toothbrush too.