

# Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (15 page)

The bwgan charged out of the cleft in the earth like an angry dragon, broad-toothed jaws snapping together like bronze shields clashing. It probably anticipated that its intended prey would dodge left or right, but Rhys had long ago learned to *always do the unexpected*

. He ran to meet it head-on and used both his momentum and the creature's to shove the spade as far down its throat as he could. The teeth splintered the protruding wooden shaft, but it was too late—the head of the spade was steel, and iron was poisonous to most of the fae. Rhys dove and scrambled to get out of reach of the venom and gore. The bwgan's body paled to its original ghastly shade and flopped back and forth like a cut snake on a hot rock.

He watched the monster's death throes with mounting anger.

*Bwganod do not live on this side of the ocean.*

Not only had the vicious thing been deliberately sent by some faction of the faery court, it had been magically transported. Rhys knew it would have taken a great deal of power to move the earthbound beast over so much water. And for what purpose?

After Morgan had broken the spell that bound him, the ruling fae were restrained by their own laws. They could not place a finger on him directly—but Rhys knew all too well that they had no shortage of other faery creatures to send in their stead. He'd seen the ellyll, after all, and knew the Tylwyth Teg were watching him. And he should have known that simple spying would never satisfy them. Obviously they wanted him dead.

By all the gods, they wouldn't find him easy to kill.

At last the bwgan ceased its thrashing, and its remaining eye darkened. Rhys was thankful the ugly creature had landed right side up because there was one last task to perform. Drawing a utility knife from a sheath on his belt—a gift from Leo—he peeled the cold, clammy skin from the broad forehead. As the skull was revealed, so was something deeply embedded in the bone. Rhys held his breath as he applied the tip of the knife to gently pry out the object. It resisted his efforts at first, then popped from its cavity with a sound like a joint dislocating. Wiping away the dark, bluish blood with the edge of his T-shirt, he examined his prize in the sunlight. It was somber in color and oddly shaped, like a rounded triangle—flat on one side and as big as a duck's egg. But no egg shimmered so. The light played over and around it as if it were a darkly iridescent pearl.

Rhys knew that what he held in his hand was incredibly valuable, but the value didn't lay in its beauty. Bwgan stones were rarer than the most priceless of jewels. Few of these deadly

creatures produced them, and there was no way to tell if a bwgan had one or not until it died—a rare occurrence in itself. Druids prized the stones, magi sought them, and the Fair Ones themselves esteemed them highly.

He had no idea what he would do with it or even what he *could*

do with it—he was certainly no druid—but the gods had delivered it into his hands, so he thanked them for it. Perhaps a use for it would become apparent later. In the meantime, he had other things to do. He jogged to the corral and was immensely relieved to see Lucy still standing where he'd left her. She whickered when she caught sight of him, but he dared not go to her right away, not stinking like that predatory monster. Rhys headed instead for an old metal barrel that caught water from a rain gutter and immersed his hands and wrists, rubbing away the gore that coated them. Finally, he peeled off his shoes and clothes and dropped them into the water, leaving them to soak—but not before knotting the stone into a sock. It would be safe enough in the barrel for the time being.

Naked, he untied the gray horse. “There’s a brave *llafnes*.” *Big girl*.

He spoke soothingly to her, crooning a mix of Welsh and Celtic words. They had to pass the dead salamander in order to get to the barn, but he walked Lucy in a wide arc around it. Her nose quivered and her ears were in constant motion, alert for danger, but she didn't balk. “You'd make a very fine warhorse,” he said. Her solid build and her responsive, steady temperament were ideal. She was slow right now and favored her left rear leg, but he had confidence she would grow strong again. “A shame it is that no one has need for such steeds in this age.”

They left the grassy field and headed toward the barn that held both her stall and his quarters. He was grateful now that Leo had insisted he buy a few more clothes. Rhys had thought one set more than sufficient for his needs, but he hadn't counted on getting them bloodied in battle.

*Another good reason to fight naked.*

At least the bwgan's death was likely to discourage any other creatures from showing up. For a while.

It didn't do a thing to discourage human visitors, however.

He was a hundred feet from the barn when a strange truck pulled into the farm's driveway. Rhys swore aloud but there was nothing he could do—he wouldn't rush the injured horse nor walk her across the hard-packed corral, even though it would have been the faster route. He was just forty feet from getting his nude self out of sight when the truck—followed by a second one drawing a trailer—pulled up beside him.

Rhys had only a fleeting moment to wonder if the gods hated him after all before a man jumped down and walked toward him. His hair was long and bound in a tail, while charms and fetishes bounced around his neck. His orange T-shirt proclaimed “Zombie Apocalypse Survival Team,” which made no sense to Rhys at all. But he recognized the man from the clinic, a healer of animals like Morgan.

“Hi, I’m Jay. You have  
*got*

to be Reese.” He handed Rhys a thick, checkered shirt, like Rhys’s own, only this one was red. “I see we caught you at a bad time. Thought you might be able to use this.”

“Rhys,” he corrected and took the shirt, tying it around his waist like an apron or a kilt. He took Jay’s hand then, noting that the man’s grip was solid enough, despite his wiry build. “And I thank you for the loan of the shirt. I was not expecting guests to arrive.”

“I figured that.” Jay laughed as he made a quick inspection of the horse’s bandages. “These dressings look really good. Neat, clean, no seepage. Morgan said you were taking great care of Lucy. So...you go au naturel often?”

“In truth, I’m feeling more than a little foolish now. My work for the day was done, my clothes were filthy, and I stripped them off. I was just taking Lucy back to the barn and enjoying a bit of sun before making use of the shower.”

“And along come a bunch of strangers. Sorry for the rude surprise. Morgan lets us borrow the corral in order to practice, so we bring our horses out here every couple weeks.” Jay waved toward the others—five men and three women who had clustered near one of the vehicles.

Most of them were trying to avoid looking in Rhys’s direction. There was embarrassed giggling from two of the women, however, and more than a few stolen glances. Strange behavior—women of his own village would have been bold enough to walk up to a warrior and invite him to their bed had they favored what they saw. Nudity and sex were normal parts of life among the clans, and there were no customs or laws decrying them. Women as well as men chose their partners as they pleased, and no one thought ill of it nor attempted to deter it. In this time, however, there were rules aplenty, written and unwritten, and so many social mores that Rhys wondered if he would ever remember them all.

“Next time I’ll be certain to dress for the occasion,” Rhys said and made his escape. For a moment he considered placing his body on the far side of the horse, but customs be damned, it wasn’t in his nature to hide—and besides, he’d rather keep the group’s attention on

*him*  
than the rest of the farm.

Particularly with a dead bwingan still lying in the field.

If the group kept to the corral, they wouldn’t be able to see the monster salamander—if they could see it at all. Now that Rhys was mortal, he wasn’t certain why

*he*  
could see the thing, but perhaps it was because he’d once been a fae creature himself.

As a  
boy, he’d known people who had

*the gift*

, as it was said, meaning they could perceive the Fair Ones readily, but over the

centuries fewer and fewer had the ability. It was unlikely that any of Jay's group had a latent talent for seeing faeries.

Morgan, however, might be different. If she really did possess some fae blood as the messengers had claimed, would she see what others could not? Rhys had no idea how he would explain the bwgan's existence, never mind its presence.

First things first, however. Rhys made the horse comfortable, checked the bandages again, paying particular attention to those on the left hind leg. He filled her bucket with fresh water, and she buried her nose in it, drinking long and deep.

He sought water too, standing under the shower in his quarters as he pondered his biggest problem. How did one dispose of a bwgan? He didn't know how long Jay and his friends were going to linger—he didn't even know what it was they were here to *practice*

. Morgan was sure to be home soon as well. That meant the bwgan could not be dealt with until after dark, but he hated to leave it so long. He was still thinking it through as he towed off and dressed, deciding to go barefoot until his shoes dried. Maybe he could—

A sudden sound set every nerve alert. Unmistakable and impossible at the same time, it resonated again. And again. A ring of steel on steel that Rhys had heard countless thousands of times over the centuries but never in recent history.

Swords.

## **ELEVEN**

D

Despite Jay's urgent warning to take the pieces of the silver collar home, she'd managed to drag her feet for a couple more days. Now Morgan plunked the box in the backseat of her car. It wasn't the only task she'd been putting off. She'd been intending to get the collar repaired, just as she'd told Jay, and hadn't done it—but it wasn't because she hadn't had time. She could have made the time, *would*

have made the time. Except the real reason she'd thought to have the collar fixed was not so she could put it back on the dog. It was so she would have something to remember the dog by.

Which would mean she'd given up on ever seeing Rhyswr again. And so she'd stuck the box in her office where it was guaranteed to be buried by papers and books and samples of veterinary pharmaceuticals. Out of sight, out of mind.

The silver links were very much on her mind now, however. And so were Jay's words. And what Rhys had once said too. Good grief, was she starting to believe that *faery-forged* crap? But what other explanation was there? She'd thought she had it all figured out,

but the news about the silver blew all her theories away. Now her brain hurt from trying to make sense of the impossible.

Needing a friend to talk to, she'd tried phoning Gwen several times but hadn't succeeded in reaching her. She wished with all her heart that she could talk to her grandmother. For some reason, it seemed that Nainie might have been the one person who could decipher the strange situation. What if Jay was right? Morgan sighed then and shook her head as she climbed into the car.

*No.*

She wasn't ready to start accepting faery tales as truth. There was a perfectly logical explanation, a scientific explanation for all this. There

*had*

to be. She just hadn't figured it out yet.

She turned her car into her driveway and was surprised to find Jay's green pickup parked by the barn, as well as a big gray truck attached to a horse trailer. Was it

*that*

day already? Jay and his role-playing buddies came to the farm to practice archery, swordplay, and occasionally even jousting activities that didn't readily fit in suburban backyards.

Morgan parked beside the other vehicles and had barely gotten out of the car before she was captured in a hug by Jay's wife, Starr.

"I'm so glad to see you! Did you just get off work? You must be starving—we've laid out a picnic since it's so nice outside, and there's lots and lots of food. Let me find you a plate. Oh, and you have to try the fruit bars I made," Starr chattered as she led Morgan around the corner of the barn.

"Thanks. If they'll give me your energy, I could really use some," said Morgan with a laugh.

*If it would give me some of your style, I'd like that too.*

Starr had straight black hair that hung to her waist, intricately braided with beads and tiny bells. She always dressed in bright gauzy layers of hand-dyed cloth, long skirts and shawls and scarves. Starr's unique bohemian fashions enhanced her appearance rather than detracted from it, and next to her, Morgan always felt plain as a jenny wren (to borrow a

phrase from Nainie). And yet she was certain she'd trip on her own skirt or be choked by a scarf if she ever tried to dress like that. She certainly couldn't work in such clothes...

*And what do I ever do but work?*

The air was suddenly rent with loud cheers and decidedly male hoots that belonged more to a football game than to archery. Still chuckling, she turned to look—then stopped in her tracks and stared.

The group was cheering for Rhys. Riding without saddle or reins, he was guiding a big black Friesian in an easy circle as he drew a medieval longbow. His aim was astonishing—he nocked arrow after arrow and all flew into the center of a straw target.

