

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (17 page)

By all the gods, the earth will not open here again.

Not here, that was certain, but what about the rest of the farm? Rhys straightened from his task and looked around. He'd drawn them here, faeries and monsters—and the gods only knew what next—to Morgan's land. And all she'd done to deserve it was to show kindness to a dog. True, the faery queen had declared Morgan to be eithriedig, and as such she should be fully protected. But would the bwgan have hesitated to prey on her? They were known for their ferocity, not their brains.

Perhaps that was why the Tylwyth Teg had sent the creature in their stead. The royal edict officially tied their hands from directly harassing Morgan, but the darker side of the fae realm was filled with things that often bit first and asked questions later. If at all.

For a moment, Rhys wished he could warn her...then realized that even if she believed him, it wouldn't be nearly enough to keep her safe. No, it was up to him. He'd vowed to protect her, and he would find a way.

TWELVE

M

organ had been called out just before dawn to attend a goat. The owner had expected twins for certain, perhaps triplets because of the doe's sizable abdomen. However, when labor set in, the doe strained without result. When Morgan arrived, she found a kid presented crosswise and had to coax it into proper position. Once she did, it practically popped out like toast. And so did three more behind it! The owner was ecstatic and so was Morgan. Quads weren't unheard of, but they weren't common. And such healthy and strong quads were rare. It was one of those gratifying cases that made her glad to be a veterinarian. As she left, the mother was munching grain, and all four of the kids were behaving more like spring-loaded toys than newborns.

She wondered if goats would do well on her farm and made a mental note to ask Rhys about it. The man seemed to know all sorts of things and was proving himself just as capable around the farm as he was with horses. She'd discovered the empty garden plot neatly turned over and prepared for planting next spring. The old apple orchard north of the barn and all the berry bushes were pruned, as were the rose bushes around the house. Roofing was repaired on the outbuildings, and fences were mended. Thanks to Rhys, the farm was gradually losing its overgrown and neglected appearance.

Morgan found herself less inclined to stay late at the clinic doing paperwork. She was still devoted to her patients and continued to put in long days when they needed her, but she looked forward to Rhys's company in the evenings.

The Celtic warrior and faery grim stories had not been repeated. She couldn't begin to guess his reasons for telling her such crazy tales in the first place but decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he'd just been embarrassed by being found naked in a stranger's home; maybe he was trying to avoid revealing his identity. At the time, she hadn't gotten close enough to smell his breath—maybe he'd been under the influence of alcohol, perhaps even a so-called party drug. It certainly wasn't unusual for people to get naked when they'd overindulged.

Or get strange.

She'd had an instructor in college who, when he'd gone over his limit, often claimed to be the offspring of an extraterrestrial pairing with a human! Jay would no doubt have been fascinated...

As far as origins went, she still didn't know a lot of personal information about Rhys. He recalled plenty about Wales but didn't seem to remember how he managed to show up in Spokane Valley, Washington. Jay could believe that faery curse song and dance if he wanted to, but Morgan preferred to read up on topics such as clinical amnesia. Leo had suggested short-term memory loss, and she studied that too. There just

had

to be a rational explanation for Rhys's mental condition, something scientific and solid, something she could accept.

Because if she didn't find satisfaction for her mind, would it ever allow her to follow her heart?

Rhys pounded the last nail in place and stepped back to look at his work. A large horseshoe was fastened over one of the doors to the barn, its open end on the right-hand side.

"Won't that let all the luck spill out?" asked a familiar voice.

"Leo! Good it is to see you again." Rhys went to the old man at once and clapped him firmly by the shoulders. "I didn't hear your car."

"Probably because you've been pounding nails for the last twenty minutes. Plus, I parked by the road so I'd remember to pick some of those crab apples by the front gate—they make a good jelly, you know—and I walked up. Been sitting over there on Doc Edward's porch swing, watching you."

"You should have hailed me."

Leo shrugged. "You looked pretty intense about what you were doing, so I thought I'd just wait. Besides, the swing's in the shade, so it was no hardship to watch somebody else work. I thought you'd just be putting up one or two horseshoes, though. Instead, you got every shape and size of them over every doorway in the place."

"I found a few stacked on a rafter in the machine shed," said Rhys, stalling for time to think of how to explain his strange task. He decided right away to keep quiet about the barrel of rusty iron nails he'd already used up. Nor was he going to reveal that unnatural creatures had watched him as he did it. Or that they'd crept and slithered, flown and trudged around the perimeter of the farm, leering and hissing at him from the other side of the fence as he hammered nails into the top of every wooden post on the property. More than likely, the small fae beasts had been the unwilling forerunners of the bwgan. Rhys imagined that even the Tylwyth Teg had needed to practice a little before they could successfully send the monstrous salamander over such a distance. He wondered how many failures there had been, how many lesser fae had perished in the attempts. Of course, the Fair Ones would neither notice nor care.

No, Rhys wasn't going to talk about any of that to Leo. Nor mention that he'd buried nails deep in the hard-packed soil between gateposts so that there was a perfect ring of protection around the farm. Nails even studded the corners of the roof of Morgan's house, and Rhys had pounded two or three nails into the trunk of every tree on the property. The trees would be unaffected, but they were now poisoned against lesser fae. The Tylwyth Teg would be unable to send any more minions to the farm. If they wanted to cause trouble, they'd have to do it themselves.

"You call that a
few

? I counted about twenty or so horseshoes. And how come they're all on their sides?

Looks like the letter

C

or something."

Rhys looked at the horseshoe and back at his friend. "They're just as they should be."

"My dad always said horseshoes were for luck, kind of like four-leaf clovers. And if you didn't hang them with the opening at the top, all the luck would pour out. But maybe it's different in Wales."

Rhys considered what to say. He wouldn't talk of the Fair Ones to Morgan at present—she would equate that with madness for sure, and who knows what she would do? Perhaps even call Officer Richards again. Leo, however, was different. "The Welsh hang their horseshoes like this so they look like the crescent moon. The sign of the moon plus the iron will repel faeries. The very presence of iron weakens them, and its touch will burn or poison them."

"Never heard that one before. Seems like a mean thing to do to a cute helpless faery."

"In Wales, faeries are neither cute nor helpless, and often humans must protect themselves against them. There are many different kinds of fae—the greater ones, the Tylwyth Teg who rule over all, cannot be repelled by the presence of iron, though they can be injured by its touch. All of the lesser fae and the darker ones, now, they're the faeries that cannot abide iron at all. They'll not come near it."

"All this faery stuff reminds me of my first-grade teacher, Mrs. Farnsworth. She was English, and if we behaved and got all our work done, she'd tell us faery tales. Stories

about sprites and brownies and pixies and such, and all the squabbling they did with each other. Used to be that I couldn't wait to get to school in hopes we'd hear a story that day." Leo sighed and picked up a horseshoe from a stack. "So if I put this up over my front door, I'll have no more trouble with the little people?"

"Take two. You need to cover both doors, front and back," said Rhys, then did a double take. "No
more
trouble?"

"A couple days after you left, I started finding things out of place. Books, knickknacks, that kind of thing. They'd be on the shelves when I left the house and then there'd be a dozen on the floor when I came back. And no way was Spike responsible—he can barely get around. But nothing was ever broken.

"And then it started happening with the plates in the kitchen. Again, nothing broken, just taken out of the cupboards and stacked on the floor every morning. Never any doors or windows unlocked, no sign of anyone having gotten in, so I couldn't blame it on a prankster. Almost had it figured for some kind of damn poltergeist, like in the movies. But today I finally saw the little guy. All brown, about two or three feet high, dressed in leaves and with leaves in his hair. He was throwing my tools around my workshop like he was having some kind of tantrum."

Rhys frowned. It could only be the ellyll. "I'm thinking I should be paying a visit to your house then," he said. "I'm done with my tasks here for now. I'll just be checking on Lucy and changing her dressings and then we can go."

Leo looked relieved. "I'd like that. I'd appreciate a second opinion."

Rhys thought Leo might come with him to the barn, but he said he wanted to spend a little more time on Morgan's large and comfortable porch swing. That was fine with Rhys—he needed to think. He'd spotted the ellyll briefly while in Leo's garden, but he'd expected that any creatures working for the Tylwyth Teg would follow their target to the farm. After all, the bwgan had come directly here—
and thank the gods for that

. Why had the ellyll lingered? Perhaps it had expected Rhys to return and was simply making a nuisance of itself in the meantime.

He unwrapped the old gauze and applied new, his fingers deft and sure yet gentle. The mare twitched and lashed her tail, letting him know that she didn't like having the dressings touched where the wounds were the worst, but still she permitted him to work on them. "

Fy un hardd
," he murmured.
My beautiful one.

A fresh outer layer of cloth bandaging protected the dressings. As he finished the last, he heard Morgan's car drive up and hoped she had brought more from the clinic—

Morgan. Leo. Together. Rhys cursed and left the barn at a jog, hoping he could interrupt their inevitable conversation before Leo could call her attention to the horseshoes—or,

worse, mention what creatures they were meant to keep at bay. He found Morgan sitting in the chair beside his friend. "Lucy's looked after now," he announced, more brightly than he felt. "Afternoon to you, Morgan."

"Same to you." She smiled at him, and was it his imagination or was there just a little more warmth in her gaze than had been there yesterday?

Leo cleared his throat. "I was just telling the doc that *I found some more work for you to do*, so I need to steal you back for a little while."

Rhys relaxed. "I'll be pleased to help, as always. I won't be gone long," he said to Morgan.

"No worries. I've got plenty to keep me busy." She waved at a thick folder of papers in her lap. "Have a good time, you two."

A good time?

A strange thing to say to a man who was about to turn his hand to a task. His puzzlement must have showed because Leo leaned forward and cupped a hand to his mouth in a stage whisper. "I may have let slip there was a baseball game on TV tonight."

"Your secret male plans are known to me," said Morgan with a laugh. "Make sure you order pizza from Gibby's. They've got a special one with nachos. Don't worry about coming home early to check on Lucy—I'll do that before I go to bed. Happy bonding!"

As she went into the house, he followed Leo to his car, grateful that the subject of faeries hadn't come up. "What does she mean by *bonding*?"

"She's just referring to a fancy new catchphrase: *male bonding*

. Don't know why somebody had to go and give it a name. It's just guys getting together and having a good time doing guy-type things without women around. You know, like watching sports and drinking beer and eating a lot."