

# Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (18 page)

“Men have been doing that for many centuries.”

“Exactly. But now it’s got a damn title,” said Leo as he turned the car onto the highway. He was quiet for a long moment, then sighed. “So it seems I got a few questions to ask.

I never saw

anything like this faery creature in my whole life. For a moment, I thought I was seeing things, that maybe my mind was finally starting to go. Then that little guy looked right at me and asked me where

*you’d*

gone to and when you were coming back. Asked for you by

*name*

, that is.” The old man looked meaningfully in Rhys’s direction. “So I’m thinking, is there anything you’d like to tell me about where you’re from and what you’re doing here?”

There was no help for it. Rhys took a deep breath and told Leo his story. The old man didn’t say much as he drove, just listened, asking only a couple of brief, clarifying questions. On Rhys’s advice, they stopped to pick up supplies for the ellyll. Leo said little even then, simply paid for the purchases and got back into the car.

After his experiences with Morgan and with the police, Rhys was all too well aware of how insane his story sounded to the people of this time and place. He hated the idea of losing Leo’s friendship, and there wasn’t a thing he could do about it. The truth was the truth. But by the time the car turned into the old man’s driveway, he fully expected to be ordered off the property.

Instead, Leo turned to him, his face a curious mix of expressions—but none of them hostile. “Rhys, I used to think that people got smarter as they got older. Turns out, it doesn’t quite work that way. The longer I live, the more I realize I don’t know.

“Now you’ve dumped a whole shitload of stuff I don’t know into my world. And I gotta say, if I didn’t see that little guy with my own eyes and hear him with my own ears, I don’t know if I could have swallowed a story like that.”

“You believe me then?” asked Rhys.

Leo nodded. “Don’t get your hopes up too high, though. Maybe I’m just crazy too. So let’s go visit this—what the hell did you call it?”

“An ellyll.”

Leo gamely tried to wrap his tongue around the

*LL*

, the most difficult of all Welsh language sounds. Then snorted. “Forget it. It’s an elf.”

“But it’s an—”

“Elf.”

“An elf, then,” agreed Rhys. “But not in his hearing.” He didn’t know if

*ellyllon*

liked elves—they were similar creatures but different enough that perhaps being mistaken for one could be insulting. What he did know was that many ellyllon had quick tempers and that the ones he’d met could curse more fluently than any warrior. As elementals, they wielded a very ancient magic and were known to make up charms and spells on the fly—particularly to use against an enemy. “Perhaps it would be best if I spoke for us.”

“No argument there.” Leo led the way to the workshop on the other side of the garden.

Rhys peered inside. Nothing moved. He pushed the door open farther. No sound, no movement. “It’s not here—”

*Thwack.*

A pair of garden gloves struck him in the chest.

“There ya are, ya great

*helynt*

.” The little brown man walked out from under the workbench and pointed a long twiggy finger at him as the brown leaves that covered him rustled and fluttered.

“Me, a troublemaker? Why?” asked Rhys, surprised.

“

*Why? Why? Why?*

” mocked the ellyll. “If it weren’t for

*you*

, ya

*twpsyn*

, the Tylwyth Teg wouldn’t have marooned me in this strange country. I’m to be their eyes on ya or lose my own.” He seized a screwdriver from the scattering of tools on the floor and let it fly.

The tool struck the doorpost next to Rhys’s head and stuck there like a thrown knife. He struggled against his fighter’s

instincts and managed a polite response instead of lunging for the creature. “Far from home you are indeed, good spirit. Might I make you an offering of milk and bread?”

The ellyll’s blue eyes glittered, and he dropped the pliers he’d just picked up. “Fair starved I am, ’tis true. My current employers tend to stint on their wages.”

“It’s strange to me that such a powerful elemental need be employed at all. Surely the earth yields you her abundance.”

The tiny man snorted. “Abundance I once had, but not here. Family I once had too, but no one is left of my clan. The Tylwyth Teg fight among themselves, and the harm they would wreak upon one another spills about like a pot overboiled. I am called Ranyon,

and 'tis my fate to be alone.” He seemed to droop at the last word and sighed deeply. A number of small items tumbled from beneath the leaves that covered him—bits of copper wire, steel washers, and some tiny gears from an old clock made a half circle around the saddened creature.

“I am sorry to hear of it,” said Rhys, trying to think of what to say. Like Ranyon, he’d experienced devastating loss, but he knew of no words that could help. All he could do was kneel and gently pick up the ellyll’s treasures for him and deposit them in the tiny palm of his twiggy hand. For a moment, he wished Morgan was there—with her kind heart, he was certain she’d think of something to say.

But it was Leo who stepped up. “Well, nobody needs to be alone here, or hungry neither,” he declared and held out a hand to the dejected creature. “Ranyon, you come on in to my kitchen and we’ll get you fed. We picked up some fresh bread on the way here. Rhys said faeries like butter and cream, so I got some of that too. Oh, and you gotta try the raspberry jam that I made this summer. It’s my granny’s recipe. She was always taking home blue ribbons from…”

Surprised, Ranyon took the hand that was offered and found himself led to the house like a child, as Leo talked about food and baseball. Rhys followed behind, wondering if his friend knew what he was getting himself into and not daring to tell him.

An ellyll was extremely loyal.

As it turned out, the ellyll was an instant baseball fan too. Leo and Rhys sat on the long sagging couch with Ranyon between them, and within a few minutes, the little brown creature was standing on the cushion and loudly cheering on the Blue Jays. Rhys leaned toward the Cardinals himself, and Leo, as a Mariners fan, declared himself neutral but couldn’t help but get caught up in the close game. The three of them polished off a pair of large pizzas. Despite his size—and despite having already consumed the bread with butter and jam—Ranyon ate most of one pizza by himself. He did share a few crusts with Spike, who was more than happy to accept them from him.

“Did you notice that Spike didn’t even bark at Ranyon?” Leo whispered to Rhys during a kitchen break. “I know the dog’s deaf and blind, but there’s nothing wrong with his nose.

He

*always*

gets upset at strangers.”

“An ellyll is an elemental. He’s of the earth itself, so Spike wouldn’t scent anything odd or out of place.”

“You mean Ranyon smells kind of neutral—like a rock or a tree or something?”

Rhys nodded. “He’s much like a tree in many ways.”

“You don’t mean to tell me that all those goddamn leaves on him—”

“Grow there. Aye, they do.”

Leo shook his head as if to clear it. “Hope the damn dog doesn’t pee on him,” the old man muttered as he carried a second tray of nachos to the living room.

When the Jays surged ahead at the bottom of the ninth inning with three runs and finished seven to five, the ellyll could no longer contain himself. He bounced off the couch, vaulted the coffee table, careened off the bookcase, and somersaulted several times in front of the TV while howling and hooting with delight at the top of his lungs. His many small and shiny treasures peppered the floor.

Leo slapped his knees and laughed until tears ran down the leathery creases of his face. Rhys laughed too but with a watchful eye on his friend in case he was unable to catch his breath. He needn't have worried.

"Goddamn," wheezed Leo at last, wiping his face on a pizza-stained paper napkin. "Goddamn, I almost pissed myself. Ranyon, you are a cutup. I haven't had a belly laugh like that in heaven knows how long."

"And I haven't had such a fine meal nor such solid companions in an age and a half," chuckled Ranyon, lying on his back in the center of the room with a hand on his distended belly. "Truly, it's been a *brammer* of an evening."

"I take it that's a good thing," said Leo.

Rhys nodded. "Aye, it is indeed." He moved to gather dishes, planning to take them to the kitchen.

"Leave 'em be," said the ellyll, with a wave of his twiggy hand. "I'll be taking care of those myself tonight. It's the least I can do fer such fine hospitality."

Leo protested immediately. "You're my guest, and guests don't wash dishes."

"Ellyll likely don't wash dishes either," whispered Rhys over his shoulder, as he put the plates back on the coffee table.

"Aye," said Ranyon, as if Rhys had spoken aloud. "I've a charm fer that. It'll all be put right by morning."

Leo glanced over at Rhys, but he had no idea how to begin to explain and just shrugged. The old man opened his mouth, then closed it again as if he'd thought better of asking any questions. He was likely still mulling over what Rhys had told him about Ranyon's leaves...

In the end, Rhys agreed to stay overnight, partly because he didn't want to trouble Leo to make the long drive out to Morgan's farm in the dark, and partly because he wanted to see what his friend was going to do with the ellyll. Things played out much as he expected—Leo simply assigned Ranyon a room of his own upstairs, down the hall from the one Rhys used.

The little brown man was delighted and bounced upon the bed. "Lookit this fine bit o' comfort here!" Burrowing under the covers, Ranyon sighed happily, and it wasn't long before loud snores all out of proportion to his size were echoing along the hallway and down the stairs.

Back in the kitchen, Rhys peered at what the ellyll had left on Leo's table. A blue coffee mug had a fork and a potato peeler attached at strange angles to its handle with a carefully wound length of copper wire. The mug was half-filled with water, and in it were three smooth white stones, a sprig of something that Ranyon had called *soapwort*, and an ancient green toothbrush. The brush had a tiny copper bell wired to it.

"I don't know if it's modern art or a setup for TV reception," grinned Leo. "I guess I'll display it on top of the fridge, like the artwork my great-grandkids send me. I didn't understand what the little guy was saying when he put it together, but he was sure proud of it when he was done."

"The ellyllon do not create art. 'Tis a charm, and a strong one."

"

*That?*

Shit, what's it do? Is it dangerous? Goddamn, I didn't know he was *serious* about that stuff."

"Nay, it's not dangerous, although I don't know its purpose. A charm is designed to be helpful in some way. And an ellyll takes everything seriously, especially friendship. He's not likely to leave your home now."

Leo shrugged. "Yeah, I kinda figured that. But after having you around, I found I liked having someone in the house again. The kids don't live close so they don't visit much. And it's pretty obvious you won't be here much anymore."

"The agreement is that I should stay at the farm to tend the horse. Once Lucy is fair mended, there's little reason for Morgan to keep me about."

The old man chuckled. "Buddy, if you believe that, I have a bridge to sell you."

"Why would I be wanting a bridge?"

"Okay, forget the bridge. You like this woman, right?"

"More than like, 'tis true."

"And you've told her that, right?"

"Not in so many words," said Rhys, then relented. "No, not a word at all. My story is a strange one, and she thinks me touched in the head. Would you have believed me if not for Ranyon?"

"It certainly would have been harder," Leo agreed. "But we're friends, and that means I would have

*tried*

to believe. I would have at least entertained the possibility, even if it was only for a few minutes. Building a relationship will help Morgan be able to believe too, because she'll know you and trust you."

"I'm thinking I need to be patient with Morgan. She needs more time."

“But she knows how you feel, right? You’ve let her know that much, haven’t you?”

Rhys frowned at him. “I labor on her farm. I take care of the horse, but there’s much to be done on Morgan’s land to make it yield again. Surely she knows my intentions from my work.”

“Wanna bet? Any hired hand could do the same. A  
*stranger*

could do the same. Your work shows her you’re not lazy, and that’s good, but it doesn’t do a thing to make her feel romantic toward you. Maybe it was different for the women in your time, but it’s been my experience that modern women want more from their men.”

“More what? I cannot bed her until she accepts me.”

“You don’t seem to understand that there’s plenty to be done between showing off your work ethic and having sex with her. You know, when I was younger I thought like you do, that my gal simply ought to ‘know’ how I feel.” He made quotation marks in the air with his gnarled fingers. “Later, I caught on that women didn’t work that way. I needed to show her she was

*special*

to me, and after we were married, I learned I had to keep on showing it.”

“Special,” repeated Rhys.

“Exactly. I brought my Tina flowers and little surprises, did nice things for her. Hugged and kissed her and told her I loved her as often as I could. It’s always those little things, the little attentions that count the most. And thank heavens, I did better at it as I got older.”

Rhys considered his parents, his sister and her husband, his friends—all the relationships he knew. In his former life, Rhys’s motives and intentions would have been perfectly clear. Or would they? According to Leo, a man courted a woman much the same in any age. Perhaps he had been a warrior, in the company of warriors, much too long.

“Think of it this way—women are just like gardens. You do a lot of little things every day for a garden to make it grow, right? Well, a woman’s needs have to be met in order for your relationship to flourish.” Leo grinned then. “Even

*marriages*

have to be nurtured, and ours was happy for fifty-three years. Guess we were damn fine gardeners, Tina and I.”