

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (31 page)

“So it stores energy then,” Starr held her palm several inches above the dark pearlescent surface. “Omigosh, I can feel it from here!”

“Aye. The older the bwgan, the stronger the magic. This stone is very powerful.” Rhys picked it up and tucked it into the old man’s left hand, gently closing his gnarled fingers around it. “Keep it with you, my friend. I’m hoping it may shield you from the worst of the Fair Ones’ spell.”

“Feels warm,” murmured Leo. “Kinda nice for a monster’s rock.” He paused to take a couple of breaths. “If I get nightmares though, I’m kicking your ass.”

Rhys squeezed his hand gently. “Aye, well, I’ll present my arse to be kicked as long as you stay with us.”

“Ain’t going nowhere.” The old man sighed and closed his eyes. The ellyll moved closer to him and patted his shoulder.

“The stone’s got to be close to ya all the time,” instructed Ranyon. “Ya can’t be putting it down and leaving it about. A pocket’ll do.”

“Damn hospital gown doesn’t have one,” muttered Leo without opening his eyes. “But I promise I’ll keep it with me, bud. I’ll shove it in my underwear if I have to.”

The ellyll waved everyone else back, then folded his long fingers around Leo’s fist that cupped the stone. He muttered an incantation in an odd blend of Gaelic, Welsh, and something else that Rhys recognized as an ancient fae language that even the Tylwyth Teg no longer used. The lights in the room flickered out for a brief moment, just long enough for a bright greenish glow to escape from between Leo’s fingers. When the lights came on, the glow was gone. And Leo was sound asleep, his worn face relaxed, and his color much better than it had been.

“That was awesome,” said Jay. “Is he cured?”

Ranyon sat back and shook his head. “Nay. I know much magic and many incantations, but this cursed spell is too strong. All I was able to do was bind the bwgan stone to him so he cannot lose it nor can it be taken from him. It’s got a glamour on it now, so it can’t be seen by anyone who hasn’t seen it afore.

“And I sent him off to dream—the dear old *hen ddyn*

needs his rest, or he’ll not have the strength for this battle.” The ellyll sniffled a little and accepted a handful of tissues from Starr. “I fear fer him greatly. The bwgan stone will keep him alive, and thanks be that we have it, but it cannot heal him.”

“So it gives us
time

but little else,” growled Rhys. He wanted badly to punch something, and only the fact that Leo might need what little was in the room kept him from giving in to the impulse.

“What do we do now?” asked Jay.

The ellyll jumped to his feet. “I’m fer givin’ the Tylwyth Teg a black eye for what they’ve done to Leo, that’s what. Those that have wrought the spell have to be made to undo it.”

“Agreed,” said Rhys. “But someone needs to watch over him, and Ranyon, you would be best.”

“You’ll be needing someone to watch yer back too, ya know. The Fair Ones are crafty as well as cruel, and who can know what they’re planning to spring on ya next? They won’t be happy till yer back in their realm with a collar on ya.”

“If the faeries have it in for you, Rhys, then is Morgan in danger too?” asked Jay.

He was already thinking that. “I had hoped not, but the attack on Leo changes my thinking. I shouldn’t have let her leave alone.” If the Tylwyth Teg had attacked Leo because he was Rhys’s friend, then Morgan could very well be their next target. She might have been declared eithriedig by the queen of the Tylwyth Teg herself, but it now appeared unwise to rely on that status. The monarch had many enemies—why would they hesitate to breach the immunity she’d granted to Morgan?

“Leo and Morgan are our friends, so this is our battle too,” said Starr. “We’d like to help.”

Rhys shook his head. He had vowed to protect Morgan, and he would continue to do so—however, he knew he couldn’t protect Jay and Starr as well. “My thanks to you for the offer, but

we can’t risk the Fair Ones getting their hands on you,” he said firmly. “They’d like nothing better than to have extra human captives to bargain with.” Or play with.

Jay was about to protest when Ranyon added. “Tis true. Yer like to disappear without a trace, both of ya. We dare not reveal ya to the Tylwyth Teg. For sure they’ll have Rhys trading his freedom to pay for yer lives. We need ya to be our help in secret.”

“Okay,” Jay sighed. “I don’t like it, but I see your point. So we’ll be
covertly

helpful instead. That means we should look after Leo, and Ranyon, you should be going with Rhys. After all, you’ve got some magic, and you’re familiar with the fae.”

Starr put her hand on the little ellyll’s shoulder. “I can’t cure Leo either, but I have healing skills and I can make sure he’s comfortable. At least until his family gets here in the morning.” She bent and whispered, “I’ll stop by and feed Spike too.”

In answer, Ranyon pulled off his new blue T-shirt and spoke a few words over it, then handed it to her. “Spike’s a fearful little beast because he can’t hear or see, and it makes him testy. Give ’em the shirt—it’ll soothe him as soon as he puts his nose to it.” He sighed. “I’ll trust him and Leo to ya then. Leo would be telling me to go and help Rhys anyway.”

She gave him a hug and gently patted his leafy back. "I know he would."

"I'll take first watch with Leo," said Jay. "Starr can drive you guys out to the farm, but I have a feeling there's going to be a stop at our house first."

Starr grinned and squeezed her husband's hand, then turned her attention to Rhys and Ranyon. "I don't have any magical monster's rocks," she said. "But I do have some other things that might be useful to you in this kind of fight."

Ellen didn't seem surprised in the least when Morgan turned up at Gentle Giant Rescue. "I didn't mean to come so late—" was as much as she got out before she was wrapped in an enthusiastic hug.

"You're welcome here anytime, girl," said Ellen. "If you're here to see Fred, it's getting dark, but I've got some of those solar lights along the path that'll help."

Morgan made her way to Fred's enclosure without a hitch. The dog was in the same position as always, tail hanging listlessly out the door and onto the ground. "Hey, Fred," she called out as she sat with her back against the enormous doghouse. "Ellen told me a secret. She said you came out for a little while today. She said you ate half your food too. You're doing good, buddy."

She sighed and wished she could say as much. The emotional events of the day had piled up, and her plans to simply talk them out were hijacked by tears. First a trickle, then a full-blown cloudburst. She rubbed her face on her sleeve, thinking how mortifying it was going to be to have to carry a box of Kleenex in each hand everywhere she went—when her entire face came under attack from a giant tongue. And there was an unbelievably *massive* dog behind it.

"Fred, you big old softie." Sitting down, she was at a definite disadvantage against two hundred pounds of affectionate mastiff. She struggled to her knees, as Fred enthusiastically continued his ministrations. When she turned her face away, he licked her hair into a wet tangle. Finally she managed to squirm under his chin and throw her arms around his ginormous neck. It was like wrestling a lion, especially when it took a few minutes for Fred to give up trying to lick her. But it felt

good

to hug this big

canine, and she rested her face on the soft dark coat. Maybe her love life was a total mess, but she could feel a measure of closure over her missing dog, Rhyswr. She had loved him. She could love this dog too.

It wasn't long before the two of them were in an untidy pile of arms and legs and more legs, and she was rubbing his belly.

"Are you all right in there?" Ellen called out from the gate.

Morgan sniffled and laughed. “Better than all right. Are there some papers I can sign? Because this guy says he’s coming home with me tonight.”

TWENTY

I

It was full dark but unusually warm as Rhys and Ranyon walked up the long driveway of the farm. Although the stars were visible in the black velvet sky directly above, the horizon was obscured with darker clouds that blotted out the rising moon. The occasional flash of heat lightning illuminated the trees in the distance.

Starr and Jay had armed them both, each in their own way. At Jay’s instruction, Starr produced weapons from his collection—two swords that were real, not padded wood or rattan. The blades were truly beautiful, with breathtaking dragons and exquisite lions worked into their hilts and ornamented with gemstones. Such swords must have been costly, but Rhys turned them down.

Instead, he had chosen a very plain sword crafted by a friend of Jay’s. It was short like a Roman sword, and Rhys knew from experience that the length was excellent for close-quarter fighting, for both cutting and stabbing. The sword had no decoration, but its heft and balance felt good in Rhys’s hands. The natural patterns in the blade told him that the iron had been meticulously hammered and folded on a blacksmith’s anvil just as blades had been made centuries ago, tempered and blended with just enough carbon to make strong steel.

He considered taking a round metal shield. It would be a natural choice for the arena against a human or animal opponent, but his battle with the fae was unlikely to last long enough to use it. His only hope was to make a quick decisive assault, and for that, he’d need a weapon in both hands. The sword would be in his right. For his left, he chose a long iron dagger with blades that sprang out at the sides, giving it a trident appearance. The design was highly functional—it could catch the downstroke of a sword blade and perhaps even break it.

Maybe the Fair Ones couldn’t be repelled by the presence of iron, but the touch of it could still wound and even kill them. Rhys was counting on that.

Ranyon was apparently thinking the same. Starr found a length of thick cotton rope that he could tie around his tiny waist. The narrow dagger he stuck in it hung like a great sword against his small frame. The ellyll added first one, then two, of Jay’s small throwing axes to his makeshift belt. “All I need now is a fine great horse like Brandan’s Boo,” he declared.

“A horse like that would mistake you for a thistle in its coat and roll on you,” said Rhys.

Ranyon sniffed. “I’ve a charm fer that.”

Starr’s offerings had been different. She produced small pouches of dried flowers—primroses, Saint-John’s-wort, and marsh marigolds—all offering a measure of protection

against faery magic. In the yard behind the house, Rhys and Ranyon helped her cut a fat bundle of ash and rowan branches, with their bright fall berries still attached. Rhys remembered his mother tying bunches of them over the doorframes of the house each year.

Perhaps they'd be useful against the lesser fae

, he thought. He doubted that any plant was strong enough to shield him from the Tylwyth Teg's spells.

Starr's final gift was a pair of small pouches containing several gemstones—hematite, garnet, amber, tiger's-eye, and obsidian—which she directed them to stuff into their pockets.

After she drove away, Rhys asked the ellyll about the stones. "They're pretty, but I don't feel magic in them, not like the bwgan stone. Do I throw them at the fae or use them to bargain with?" He was only half joking.

"No, ya
twpsyn

." Ranyon squinted at Rhys from beneath his Blue Jays cap. "Ya keep 'em close to ya fer strength and protection. And they'll give you a clear head too, so ya can think what to do."

Rhys snorted at that. "Then they're not working at all. I don't yet know what to do."

Not about the fae and not about anything else

, he thought, as they passed Morgan's dark house. The woman he loved thought he was either a liar or crazy, and his best friend was dying of a malicious spell. Things couldn't be worse.

"Aye, well, it's like a battle. Ya lay yer plans, then when they go wrong, ya make things up as ya go."

"I remember my mother saying that
life
was like that."

"A wise woman then," said Ranyon. "Life is naught but battles big and small, and most of them unexpected." The truth of his words became starkly apparent as soon as they found the stable door wide open.