

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (29 page)

Moments later, Rhys was running to the bleachers with everything he had. An ambulance with lights flashing and sirens blaring was racing up the infield toward them. He could see Morgan kneeling over Leo and shouting at him, calling on the old man to hang on,
hang on
—

Everything in Rhys's heart urged him to go to her and to go to his friend, right now. But if he did so, he'd doom Leo for certain. There was only one chance to save the man who had taken him in, mentored and befriended him—and it was a long shot. As he reached the stands, Rhys veered to the left, following the path of the great black grim that only he could see.

If only Morgan hadn't seen
him

...

The EMTs had been fast, thank heavens. In minutes, Leo was on his way to the hospital, with half the team and Morgan following behind in Brandon's truck. She was grateful for the ride, feeling shaken to the core by Leo's sudden collapse. And cut to the quick by Rhys's bizarre disappearing act. Why would he run off like that? Why chase a dog? Didn't he care about Leo? Or her? Surely he couldn't have been that reluctant to come near her—she wasn't exactly scary, even when angry. And if he cared about her as he claimed, wouldn't he have come to her side no matter what?

She put it out of her mind and jumped up as the doctor came into the waiting room. She was relieved to see it was someone she knew, Kate Walmsley. "Is Leo okay? Is it a stroke?"

The doctor put her hands up in a calming gesture. "Technically, I'm supposed to talk to family only, Morgan, but I know you came in with him and his family isn't here. So, strictly professional to professional—meaning, you never heard a thing from me—Mr. Waterson is stable for the moment. We're running some tests, but he doesn't appear to have had a stroke. His heart's okay. We're not sure what the problem is yet. It might be heat exhaustion, even heatstroke—you mentioned he was outside, and it was a warm day."

"He had a hat, and I saw him drinking water." Thank heavens for Starr passing out the bottles; Morgan wasn't sure she would have thought of it. Still, she disagreed with the heatstroke theory. "Leo was a little excited, but he'd been seated for most of the time, and the bleachers were shaded. I was outside as much as he was, and I'm fine."

“But you’re not taking three prescriptions that make you even *more* susceptible to heat exhaustion.”

Point.

“I didn’t even think of that,” she said. “I should have.”

“There’s something else.” Kate leaned closer and lowered her voice. “I know he’s your friend, Morgan, but Mr. Waterson is eighty-five years old. There might not be anything *wrong* with him per se. We’re still doing tests of course, but he just doesn’t look good to me. We have to take into consideration that it could just be his time.”

Eighty-five

? How had she not known that? Morgan would have guessed that Leo was in his seventies. “His time—you mean he might not pull out of this?”

“He might have ten more years to go line dancing, or he might have a week. Things get iffier the older you get. My grandmother is ninety-four and still going strong, but my dad passed just last year,” said Kate. “So if you know how to get ahold of his kids, they really should be notified. Just in case.”

Morgan nodded. “He has a son and a daughter in Seattle—I’ll make sure they’re called. I probably should have done it already. Is Leo awake? Can I see him?”

“Sure. But keep it as short as you can. We don’t want to wear him out.”

As the doctor disappeared down another hallway, Starr came up and put an arm around Morgan. “I can call Leo’s kids for you. I know them both pretty well. You go ahead and check on him—you’ll feel a lot better if you see he’s okay.”

“Thanks,” said Morgan. “I appreciate it.”

Room 315 was fairly cheerful as hospital rooms went. It had a large window overlooking the trees that covered the grounds, and the walls were a pleasant creamy yellow. But Leo himself looked washed-out—his skin almost gray against the white sheets.

“Forgive me for not standing up in the presence of a pretty girl,” he said, without opening his eyes.

“Sage before beauty,” she quipped and took his hand.

He chuckled. “Quick as well as pretty. No wonder Rhys is so sweet on you.”

Morgan swallowed hard. “He doesn’t seem that sweet today. I could have used his help.”

“Ranyon said Rhys went after that dog—it’s a goddamn grim you know.”

“Oh, Leo...” She swallowed hard, a task made harder by the fact that all the moisture seemed to have disappeared from her mouth and throat. She settled for gently rubbing the old man’s hand in silence, although she felt like bawling. Either Rhys had talked Leo into believing his crazy story or Leo was in far worse shape than the doctor thought.

And who the hell was
Ranyon
?

He cornered the grim at last behind the blacksmith shop of the temporary medieval town. Rather than a mastiff, as Rhys had once been, the monstrous dog was a tall sight hound. But it was as black as the night itself, just like every other grim created by the Tylwyth Teg. The dog bared enormous teeth, its broad head well above Rhys's waist. It didn't bother to struggle as Rhys seized its silver collar. Instead it made a low chuffing sound as if laughing at him.

"You have no right to be here," snarled Rhys. "This isn't fae land; this isn't under the control of the Fair Ones. Undo what you've done to Leo. It isn't your task."

Unable to form words with canine lips, the creature spoke with its mind, and it was all Rhys could do not to recoil at the dark, oily feel of its voice in his head.

It'll be fae land soon enough if they have their way. There are many seeking new territories to rule, new diversions.

"And you? You need diversion too that you would dare come here? Grims do not perform their tasks on this side of the waters."

Why not? Pathetic humans die here just as surely. It seems that a grim would find unending satisfaction in this new land, countless delicious deaths to herald. Besides, a barghest goes where he is commanded to go.

"You were mortal once. You had a will of your own."

The great dog made a noise of disgust.

I am powerful now. I am immortal now. What need have I for will? Your will did not make you human again.

"No, but it was my will that brought me here, because I chose whom I would serve. And it was not the Tylwyth Teg." Rhys looked at the intricate silver links in his grasp, the collar, so similar to the one that he had been forced to wear. He released it in revulsion. The tall black dog made no effort to escape, and it occurred to him that it had

wanted

Rhys to catch up to him. The creature could have simply disappeared in a scattering of vapor—

You'll not walk on two legs for long. The Fair Ones will have you back. Perhaps, they'll make you a mindless bwgan this time. Perhaps they'll send you to visit the woman who unmade your spell—

"I'll die before that happens." In a move almost too fast to follow, he had a knife to the creature's throat. "And you'll die if you don't release Leo. The Fair Ones have no cause to harm him."

The chuffing laugh returned, louder now, but the humor didn't reach its pitiless eyes. *I already do not breathe, or have you forgotten so soon? My heart does not beat, I do not bleed. You cannot injure me. It's*

you

the fae wish to injure, by preying on those you are so foolishly attached to.

The dark creature sat as if relaxed and unconcerned, with Rhys's knife still pressing against its massive neck. The blade hissed as it scorched the skin beneath the fur, as the iron in the steel reacted to the fae elements. Incredibly, the monster leaned forward slightly so that the blade pressed deeper, mocking Rhys's efforts to intimidate it.

And when have the Fair Ones ever needed cause in order to do as they wish? They want you back. But the spell was broken, and you're not in their realm. And so they will offer a trade, one you will not dare to turn down.

Rhys cursed inwardly and sheathed the useless weapon, as a sick feeling settled in his gut. The grim's words were all too true. Rhys was completely mortal and thinking like one.

Of course

he had no power over the grim—nor would it be swayed from its mission. All barghests had been human once, but that didn't mean they retained their humanity. Some lost it quickly, some lost

it a little at a time over the centuries. Some, like the black creature before him, discarded it willingly. They came to relish their merciless work, thriving on the fear and chaos they caused, savoring death and suffering in all its forms, as they had once savored food and drink. Rhys repressed a shiver as he realized what could have happened to him if he had remained much longer in the faery realm—what he might have

become

. What he could still become if the Fair Ones dragged him back...

Suddenly a small form flew past Rhys and descended on the dog with a flurry of punches and kicks. "Ya

plentyn gordderch

! Ya great black bastard! I'll tear ya apart with my own hands fer what ya done to him!

Ya bloody

llofrudd

!"

Rhys yanked Ranyon out of the way just as long white fangs snapped together where the ellyll had been. The little man continued to swing his strange twiggy arms as Rhys held the back of his blue shirt.

"Ya murderin'

lladdwr

!" Ranyon shouted at the dog, who simply shook his fur out all over as if the ellyll's words were nothing more than annoying flies.

Rhys wondered what the grim

would

care about. “Never mind, Ranyon,” he said. “The dog is only a slave. He just told me he has no need of free will.”

The creature stilled.

“No mind of his own, so he cannot be held accountable,” Rhys continued, taking a few steps back as if trying to drag the ellyll away. “There’s no point in calling a puppet names.”

Ranyon stopped struggling in Rhys’s grasp. “Aye, I see what ya mean,” he said, playing along. “I should have realized it’s just a foolish toy for the fae to play with.”

The big canine’s lips curled back to expose its shining teeth, and its eyes glowed red.

“Only a servant,” said Rhys, sliding one hand into his pocket. “Good for bowing and scraping and taking orders. More to be pitied than feared.”

The monstrous black dog leapt for his throat. Rhys’s reflexes were a scant half second faster only because he’d been ready. He dove out of the way—but not before slapping a small white cotton pouch into the creature’s gaping maw, hoping it would go straight down the black gullet. The beast spun to savage him where he’d rolled, when it stopped suddenly. It backed up a step, then another. Gnashing its jaws, white foam began to bubble up from its throat and it began clawing at its muzzle and belly. Rhys snatched up Ranyon and dashed behind a row of portable toilets just as a soundless explosion sent shock waves through the air.

When they peered around to look, the grim was gone save for a blackened spot on the dusty ground. Rhys tensed, waiting for the humans to come running.

Nothing happened. A bored-looking shopkeeper walked around the back to empty a bucket of soapy water, looked at the charred spot, and yelled at someone inside the booth, “Those boys have been setting fires again.” When he left, Ranyon looked up at Rhys.

“What
cymysgiad
was that ya fed the murderin’ beast?”

“No potion at all,” said Rhys. He sat Ranyon on his shoulders and jogged back toward the bleachers. “It was just salt from the sea. Starr gave a bag to each of us this morning. For protection, she said, because it was pure.”

“I’ll wager she meant to keep ya from getting yer head bashed in, not defendin’ ya against a grim.”

“Aye, well, it worked.” Rhys didn’t mention that he hadn’t been certain that it would. All he’d had to go on was the effects of salt on the bwgan’s carcass. “Tell me about Leo.”

The ellyll made a choking sound. “It’s not his time, yet he’s not long fer this world. ’Twas a spell the grim delivered upon him! ’Tis draining Leo’s life away by degrees.”

Rhys’s worst fears were confirmed. Just as he had suspected, his friend was simply one more pawn in the Fair Ones’ deadly games. A deep burning anger settled in his gut.

The Tylwyth Teg had to be stopped, but damned if he could think of how to do it. And if he failed, Leo was not going to be the only victim. The Fair Ones would never stop trying to take over this land, and more humans would fall prey. Gods alive, had he been the one to open the floodgates? Had the Tylwyth Teg been trying to establish themselves here all along, or had he inadvertently shown them the way?

“I’ve not got enough magic to counter the spell,” sniffled Ranyon. “I have no charm that can ease what’s happening to him, and I know no enchantment strong enough.”

“Will a bwgan stone help?”

“Aye, ’twould help a great deal, but where ya gonna get something like that in *this* world?”

He smiled without humor. “The Fair Ones gifted me with one.”