

# Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (10 page)

“You’re very lucky that Doc Edwards has been concerned enough about you not to press charges, never mind make sure you’re dressed. She’s a kind woman, perhaps too kind. My wife probably would have shot you if you’d showed up buck naked in *our*

backyard. I figure when you get on your feet, you can pay the woman back for the clothes—but I’m going to suggest that you bring the money to me to pass on. I can’t enforce it, but I think it would be wise if you didn’t bother Dr. Edwards again.”

*Kindness again.*

“My thanks,” Rhys managed. “I will repay her for these.”

“I’ll be back to get you in about twenty minutes. You too, Mr. Waterson. I’ve got some paperwork to fill out and then you’ll both be out of here.”

Richards left and Rhys considered the green bag. It was strange material, almost thin enough to see through and slick to the touch even though it was dry.

*Plastic.*

He pulled the clothing from the bag and set it out on the bed. It was so very different from what he had once known. Sure, he was aware of what each item was and how it was worn, but seeing and doing were sometimes different things. The orange shirt and pants were closer in design to the pullover tunic and simple

*braecci*

he was accustomed to wearing in his previous life.

Luckily the plastic packet of three small white things had a drawing on it. The idea was vaguely similar to a Roman loincloth but was all made of one piece. He chose one and knew enough to put it on first, but it took a couple of tries—and Leo clearing his throat meaningfully—to decide which way it should face. The braecci—

*pants*

, he corrected himself—were a fine dark blue that reminded him of woad, a dye his mother and sisters had made of fermented leaves, but the garments weren’t woven out of wool. In fact, none of the items were made from wool. The fabrics were strangely soft, except for the pants, which felt more like stiff linen.

“Are there no sheep here?” he asked Leo as he rubbed the material between his fingers. “This cloth is strange to me.”

“Cotton. Comes from a plant, you know? They make everything out of it.”

Like linen then, Rhys decided. But finer. Softer.

Finally he was dressed. Leo had informed him that the little white square in the collar of the black

*T-shirt*

was meant to be hidden inside at the back of his neck. The pants, which the old man said were more properly called

*jeans*

, had a

*zipper*

, which clamped together like wolfen teeth when Rhys pulled on a small metal charm. He'd pulled it up and down a few times, amazed at the clever mechanism—and promptly learned that the tiny metal teeth could snag cloth! Thankfully he was able to pull the hem of his T-shirt free.

“You’ll want to take care there, son,” said Leo drily. “You get your dangling bits caught in that and you’ll be singing soprano.”

Rhys didn’t understand all the words, but the inference was plain. He’d definitely be careful.

The final fastener on the jeans was also metal—Leo called it a

*button*

. There had been no buttons in his previous life. And although he’d seen them in use since about the thirteenth century, he’d never had cause to touch one. After a moment, Rhys realized that it operated somewhat like the bone toggle on a leather pouch he’d once had. He pressed it through the fabric loop and was pleased when it stayed. The buttons on the overshirt, however, were an entirely different matter. They were tiny and flimsy, mocking his big fingers.

“You’re doing it up wrong,” said Leo. “Get over here and let me show you.”

Rhys stood near the bars and frowned as the old man undid the two fasteners he’d just managed to put together.

“Start here, son. You have to line up the bottom-most hole with the bottom-most button. Otherwise everyone will notice that your shirt’s crooked.” Leo did up the first button and waved at Rhys to continue.

“My thanks,” he said and struggled to do the rest himself. Despite the annoyance of the fasteners, he liked the shirt and its fine bold check. His people had favored woven checks and stripes, and a couple of the women in the village—his mother included—could create even more complicated patterns on their looms but none as bright as this. It was blue, the sacred color, and purest black. The material was thick and soft. Still not wool, but heavy enough to remind him of it.

“Stop there,” Leo said as Rhys fastened a button at chest level. “You can’t button it all the way up to your chin or you’ll look like an idiot. Or an old man and even

*I’m*

not that old yet. You gotta let the T-shirt show through.”

The shoes were odd, not leather at all. They had long strings hanging from them, which he ended up simply tucking inside. There was a packet of strange white mittens in the bag, but the weather was warm and he left them on the bench at first—until he recalled that they were not mittens at all, but something called

*socks*

. People of his clan had stuffed shoes with dried grass for warmth. No one had ever thought to weave coverings for their feet at the time. He put them on, but they felt strange.

“Heel’s on backward,” commented Leo. When Rhys looked puzzled, the old man called for him to toss a sock his way. “It fits this way,” he said and laid the sock along his own foot, puffing a little with the exertion of bending so far.

Rhys turned his socks around and found that they now conformed to his feet. “Better,” he said. “I feel like a child, to be needing so much help to put on my own garments. Truly, you have been kind.”

Leo shrugged. “No big deal. My brother, Ed, was in an accident. It left him so he couldn’t recall how to do anything for himself—he was perfectly capable, mind you, just couldn’t remember from day to day. Short-term memory loss is what they call it now. We all had to help him with little things like that, just remind him how stuff was done. From the looks of your hide, I figure you’ve had your own troubles.”

It was a moment before realization dawned. The man was referring to Rhys’s scars. He’d all but forgotten he had them. “They do not come to mind often. It was a very long time ago.”

“Good plan. Always best to go forward if you can. I used to say that to one of my buddies when we served together, but some of the shit we saw during the war just ate away at him. Shot himself a few years after.”

“The burden of battle is greater for some.”

“It surely is. But there wasn’t much help for someone like him in those days. Me, I had nightmares for years, still get a few, but I don’t dare let myself dwell on it. Drink more than I should sometimes if I get to remembering too much. Got out of the war with most of my hide intact and my brains unscrambled, so I just keep moving forward. Settled here and built a pretty good life.

“Say, mind if I ask where you’re from? You got an accent that’s kind of familiar.”

Rhys remembered Morgan’s incredulous reaction when he’d tried to tell her the truth about his origins. Officer Richards’s eyebrows had nearly met his hairline when Rhys repeated his story—and one of Richards’s fellows had overheard and made circular motions with his finger to his head. The gesture might be modern, but Rhys had no trouble translating it. And he’d come to the realization that his current imprisonment had as much to do with his claims as it did with his state of undress. In order to exist in this time and culture, especially in order to protect Morgan as he had sworn to do, he would have to adopt a new tactic:

*truth, but not all of it*

.

“Wales. I was born in Wales,” answered Rhys. And never mind that his country hadn’t been called that at the time or that his nativity had occurred two millennia ago.

Leo nodded. "I thought it was something like that. During the war, our unit was temporarily stationed with some British troops. Good guys, every one of them, in spite of that damn tea they drank, but two of them spoke the most complicated language I ever heard. When they spoke English, they had an accent kind of like yours, and the captain said they were—er—

*from Wales*

." He put up his hands in a gesture of peace. "Damn it, I nearly used the nickname there. Sorry. Nowadays you have to be careful of what you say, especially what you go around calling people. What used to be okay when I was a kid is politically incorrect now—and it should be, no doubt about that. But I forget sometimes, especially if I've had a couple beers."

This country had a lot of rules, thought Rhys. In fact, modern-day Wales probably had a lot of new laws as well, but as a grim, he'd had no need to pay any attention to them. He'd better pay attention now, though, if he expected to stay out of prison.

"So, where are you going when you get out of here?" asked Leo.

"I don't know." He hadn't anticipated his freedom, never mind how he was going to use it. More than anything he wanted to return to Morgan, but perhaps she needed more time. She wasn't accustomed to having a man around for one thing, and for another, he'd given her a fright. Not that she remained frightened for long. His mouth quirked as he recalled her determined expression while she threatened him with the garden hoe. No, Morgan was a very brave woman—who else would have attempted to pull a great savage dog from a man's throat? And as for himself, what other voice would have broken through his killing rage?

Truth be told, he didn't know what to do now. He had never feared battle, yet now he was at a loss as to how to approach this woman. He didn't want her to send him away again. Somehow he had to prove himself useful. She had a farm that had gone fallow, its once-fine buildings and fences in disrepair. Perhaps he could work for her, set the place to rights?

But not yet. He had to repay her for the clothing when he saw her again—and at present, he had no coin with which to do so. "I have no destination," he said to Leo. "Your advice would be most welcome."

"Well, I don't have much in the way of advice, but I

*do*

have an empty house. You can stay with me till you figure out where you're going. You look like you know how to work, and I got chores that need doing. You could earn your keep, right enough."

Rhys nodded. "That I'd be pleased to do."

## **SEVEN**

L

eo Waterson had a very large home. He insisted that it wasn't all that big, but the place was enormous compared with the thatch-roofed roundhouse Rhys had grown up in. Rhys didn't mention that, however. Instead, he ran a hand over the wide wood frame around a window—so smooth and even, everything straight and squared. "The workmanship is fine," he said, and meant it.

"Quarter-sawn oak, classic Craftsman house. Built in 1914 and we bought it in 1966. I wanted something newer, of course, but Tina loved it, and it fit our budget at the time. It's always been a bugger to heat, though," said Leo. "In the winter now, I just close off the upstairs altogether. Since Tina passed on, I've taken over the bedroom behind the kitchen. I think you'll do well in the north bedroom, on the right at the top of the front stairs. That was my son's room. Could be a mite dusty now because my knees don't enjoy the trip to the second floor, but that room usually stays cool in the summer heat. Though I expect we won't get much more of that now that it's September."

"Grateful I am for your hospitality. Have you some work that I can do?"

Leo waved a hand at him. "No shortage of it. I'm behind on just about everything you can name. I'll show you the yard if you're curious, but for God's sake, don't feel like you have to jump right into it. You'll make me feel guilty."

Just then, a small spotted terrier entered the room. Age had whitened his entire face and his eyes had a blind bluish cast to them. "That's ol' Spike. He's gone completely deaf now, so it takes him a while to realize I've come home," explained Leo. "Usually I have him locked up if someone's coming over."

"Why?"

"He'll bark at you for sure, but lately the little bugger bites. Just stand still, okay?"

Spike's gait was unsteady but determined as he sniffed his way to his master's side. Despite his small stature, when the dog laid his head against Leo's leg and closed his eyes in bliss, he reminded Rhys of his father's loyal old wolfhound. Suddenly Spike's body stiffened as he belatedly realized there was a stranger in the room. Piercing staccato barks exploded from the small dog, underscored with snarls and growls.

"Damn it, Spike." Leo made a grab for the terrier but was far too slow. Spike had already launched himself in Rhys's direction.

Instead of trying to avoid the attack, Rhys simply waited. The snarling snapping teeth came within an inch of his leg—and then the dog abruptly quieted. The fur along his spine still standing up, Spike's nostrils flared. Rhys lowered himself until he was kneeling on the floor, and the dog didn't react except to sniff at his hands. Apparently satisfied, Spike climbed into Rhys's lap, curled up, and began snoring almost immediately.

"I'll be double damned," said Leo, his eyes wide. "He must like you—I've never seen him do anything like

*that*

before. In

fact, I've never seen him take a liking to anyone much, not even when family visits. What did you do, put a spell on him?"

"No magic." Rhys stroked the spotted fur as the dog slept on. "My father taught me about animals. I like them and maybe I have a bit of a knack."