

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (16 page)

“Can you believe it?” asked Starr, a little dreamily. “He’s directing Brandan’s horse with nothing but pure body language. I guess that’s how dressage is done, but Boo’s never been trained for it.”

Body language.

Rhys’s body was certainly communicating something to hers, Morgan thought, unable to take her eyes off him. The black T-shirt he wore only seemed to emphasize the heavy muscle beneath. He was an imposing figure on horseback, yet as always, his movements were graceful, fluid. Both bow and horse seemed to be part of him, moving as a seamless whole. She’d never openly admired a man in her life, but there was no help for it—every sensuous dream she’d had replayed in her mind as she watched him.

Jay’s voice sounded in her ear, making her jump. “You think that’s good, you should see Rhys with a sword. He’s been helping all of us with our techniques.” He rubbed his left arm and shoulder. “What a workout! Mike’s had the most training of any of us, years of it, but he says he learned more in an hour with Rhys than all of it put together. Footwork, balance, the way you keep your upper body facing forward at all times—I’m sure I’ve heard it all before, but when he says it, it sounds different. It makes sense. Especially when he knocks you on your ass.”

“He hit you?”

“We were practicing. I learned pretty quick that if I don’t keep my feet wide enough apart, my opponent can dump me. The only thing that made me feel less foolish is that Rhys took Mike down too.”

“Mike? But he’s so tall—you’re always complaining that gives him an advantage.”

“That’s what I thought. But Rhys used it against him so fast he didn’t see it coming. You know what this means, don’t you?”

“You have a new playmate to invite to your Renaissance fairs?”

“He’d sure make a helluva impression.” Jay lowered his voice then. “And that’s just the point. Morgan, this guy of yours is hyperskilled with weaponry.”

“That’s pretty obvious. But so what? Brandan and Mike are too. So are the rest of you. Starr’s a whiz with her bow, while I can barely hold one steady.”

“Maybe you’re not experienced enough to see the difference. Look, even Mike and Brandan agree with me that Rhys is different.

Really

different. He seems to be a good guy and all, don't get me wrong. I like him, even though I think Starr's infatuated after seeing him naked, but—"

"She saw him
naked
?"

Jay shrugged. "He was naked when we got here. We surprised him, that's all."

"I've got a naked guy wandering around my farm and you're defending him?"

"Hey, I know people who like to be naked. Very natural and healthy. Think of the vitamin D his body is able to make on such a sunny day—"

Morgan put her hands over her ears. "I don't want to think about that, thank you!"

"The point is, no one was around, so I figure, hey, it's his business. And I know you can still hear me."

She sighed and put her hands down. "I really wanted to believe that the nudity was a one-time thing. Now I have to be concerned about it—jeez, Jay, he's living here. With me. On my property. What if he's a pervert?"

"Has Rhys ever walked around naked when you're here since that first time?"

"No."

"Ever made a move on you?"

"No."

"Ever said anything, insinuated anything, given you any reason to
suspect
he's a pervert? Even just given you a creepy feeling?"

"No, no, and no." She threw up her hands. "So he's not raising any alarms. But maybe I'm just easily fooled. For all you know, I have faulty predator-detection instincts."

"Bullshit. Veterinary medicine is as much an art as a science because our patients can't talk to us. You have to have not just good instincts, but
great
instincts to be good at it. And you're good at it, Morgan. Maybe better than Grady and me put together."

She was surprised and touched by the compliment and would have said so, but Jay wasn't finished.

"So I figure Rhys is safe enough or you'd know," he said. "But you gotta consider this weaponry thing. Morgan, I'm telling you, his level of skill with a sword or a bow or even a horse doesn't come from taking classes or attending Ren fairs."

"How do you know?"

“Because he’s on the offensive constantly. And all of his moves are instinctive; he’s not thinking about them. But he

is

thinking about how to pull his punches, so to speak. Everything he does is designed to take advantage of his opponent’s weaknesses, and

fast

. He got under Mike’s guard and took him down, like I said, but if Rhys hadn’t drawn back at the last moment, Mike would have lost one or both legs.”

“Jesus, Jay! First you tell me he’s naked, then you tell me he’s some kind of psycho!”

“That’s not what I mean at all. It’s just that his style of swordplay isn’t

play

. It’s kill or be killed. It’s the real thing, Morgan. And you can only get that kind of skill one way.”

She didn’t want to know but asked anyway. “And what is that?”

“From living it, Morgan.”

Oh, good grief.

“You really think his warrior story is true, don’t you?”

“I’m remaining open to all possibilities.”

In other words, he did. If Jay had asked her to accept the existence of unicorns, she doubted that it would have felt much different. “Look, it’s one thing to be receptive to new ideas, but this is really

out there

.”

“That’s not a valid reason to discount Rhys’s story. What about Sherlock Holmes?”

“What does he have to do with anything?”

“Sherlock Holmes said, ‘When you have eliminated the impossible—’”

Jay stepped back suddenly, and Morgan turned to see what he was looking at. She had a split second’s view of the great black horse bearing down on her. There was no time to react before she was whisked skyward and clamped tight to a broad chest.

“What the hell!” she sputtered. She was seated sideways on the horse in front of Rhys like a storybook princess. It wasn’t a secure feeling, despite his obvious strength. “Put me down!”

Her captor only laughed at her. As the horse circled the archery range at an easy canter, Morgan gradually lost her initial fear. She couldn’t fall if she tried, held fast by Rhys’s iron arms. And as far as she could tell, Rhys himself was part of the horse. She gave up and relaxed. They circled the field twice more, and Morgan found herself actually disappointed when they came to a gentle stop in front of the cheering group.

Rhys gave her a final squeeze then set her on the ground as easily as if she'd been a child.

He dismounted and walked the horse over to his owner. Morgan couldn't figure out how he guided Boo so easily without a lead rope. Rhys's hand rested on the muscled neck of the big draft animal, but Boo weighed close to a ton. If the horse decided to go in another direction, there'd be nothing to stop him. Yet he followed as if he were simply a large, companionable dog.

Morgan's heart squeezed. The horse was behaving just as her big black mastiff had, taking his every cue from his human. As Rhys had looked to
her

—and damn it all, she missed him. Seeking some privacy, she stepped around the side of a truck and scrubbed the moisture from her eyes with the heel of her hand. Sniffed and chided herself for getting so emotional—

"It's strange to see sadness on such a bright day. Are you well?" There was concern in Rhys's strong face, a softness in his gaze that contrasted with the hard muscle of his body.

"I'm just missing my dog, that's all. It's probably silly—I didn't have him all that long."

"Aye, but it's not the number of days that decides the strength of the bond." He rested a massive hand lightly on her shoulder for a moment, then strode back to the corral where Mike had finished saddling Boo.

Surprised by the simple wisdom, Morgan was left to wonder if he was speaking about her dog or something more. For the next couple of hours, she watched Rhys instructing each of the group, even Jay, who could barely ride, in the art of horsemanship. No matter who the student was, however, she only had eyes for Rhys. The way he moved was deeply familiar to her, as if she'd been watching him for years, not mere days.

She ate from a plate Starr had brought her, barely tasting the food. Barely hearing the excited conversations around her. Instead she considered the long conversations she'd had with Rhys each evening over supper. They were so easy together, so familiar. Sometimes she even knew what he was going to say before he said it. How had this man, this

stranger

, slipped so seamlessly into her life in so short a time? How had he stepped from a dream and into her every waking thought?

It's not the number of days that decides the strength of the bond

...

She still didn't have the answers she wanted—and she sure as hell wasn't ready to consider Jay's suggestion—but in the past few days, she'd managed to come to one conclusion at least.

Nainie Jones had said that someday a leap of knowing would come to her. Morgan hadn't understood then, but now it seemed that she had indeed inherited a little of her grandmother's ability to sense the future. Modern science allowed that intuition,

extrasensory perception, and presentiment existed. Plus, hunches and feelings counted for a lot in Morgan's own work. There were numberless times that she had sensed more than tested her way

to a diagnosis. So she could accept that she had a portion—a very *small*

portion—of Nainie's gift. After all, that would explain all the dreams she'd had about Rhys. It explained how she felt that she knew Rhys before she met him and why she trusted him when all logic said she shouldn't.

It didn't explain the rush of desire Morgan felt every time she was within a hundred yards of the man. But one day soon she just might try to answer that question on her own.

The sun was down before the group finished loading up their horses and their equipment and left. Rhys had enjoyed their company immensely. They seemed to appreciate his instruction, and it felt good to heft weapons again, even if they weren't exactly what he was used to. Both the bows and the swords were light for their size, more like toys than tools, and while the longbow was powerful, it wasn't suited for use on horseback. But the principles were the same and they worked well enough, as evidenced from the blood when Mike had taken a hit from Brandan. Mike had held up well. He'd accepted what they called

first aid

—was there second or third aid as well, and what might they consist of?—and then carried on with his swordplay as if nothing had happened. Mike's instincts were good, and Rhys thought he'd have made an excellent warrior in his own clan's time.

Thanks to Jay's wife, Starr, much of the leftover feast had ended up filling the shelves of Rhys's refrigerator. It appeared that Morgan would be free from having to concern herself with feeding him for days—and for her sake, he was glad not to trouble her. He hoped she would still come to the barn to visit. Tonight, however, the guests stayed long. By the time everyone

left, Morgan had pleaded weariness and retreated to her house. He missed their time together, just the two of them, at the end of the day, but this time he was grateful she was gone.

He had a bwgan to bury.

There wasn't another spade in the machine shed, but Rhys found a long steel pry bar. And amid the clutter, he unearthed a heavy yellow-and-black-striped sack—its label promising an even better tool than the bar: rock salt. He heaved the bag over his shoulder and carried both it and the pry bar to the field.

The dead bwgan looked ghastly in the moonlight. The bloated white body lay close to the crevice in the earth from which it had emerged. The mound that it had raised seemed smaller, however, and the gaping tear in its base narrower—was the earth trying to heal itself?

Salt, or
halen

as it was called in Wales, was a pure and sacred substance, and had been used since ancient times to repel evil and unnatural forces. As if he were sowing seed, Rhys scattered heavy crystals of salt over everything—the ground, the blood, the carcass. The salt pitted the pale hide of the monster, and a stinking smoke arose as the body unexpectedly began to collapse on itself. Encouraged, Rhys threw fistfuls of salt on the bwan until its bulk was considerably diminished. Finally he used the pry bar to lever what was left of the creature into the hole.

As he stuffed the last of the tail as far into the pit as he could with the steel bar, a whoosh of dank air caused Rhys to spring backward. He landed on his arse but quickly tucked his knees to his chin, barely avoiding having his feet crushed as the rend in the earth slammed shut like a huge dusty mouth. Inwardly, he cursed the Tylwyth Teg in every language he knew as he swiped the dust from his eyes with his sleeve and stood up. Cursed aloud as he realized the highly useful pry bar had gone with the monster salamander.

He still had salt left, though, and plenty of it. The white crystals glittered like quartz in the moonlight as he spread them thickly all the way around and on top of the slight depression that marked where the mound had once risen. He hated to damage the soil in such a manner—nothing would grow in this spot again—but Rhys knew that the underground was the natural realm of the Fair Ones. In the British Isles, there were *ways* that were many miles long, yet the faery mounds, thus connected, seemed like adjacent rooms. And once a way for traveling through the earth had been created, there was nothing to prevent other creatures of that realm from using the same route. Because of the salt, however, unwanted travelers would find the door sealed shut on this end.