

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (19 page)

Leo looked over the strange coffee cup charm one more time and shook his head, then headed off to bed with Spike in tow.

Rhys went upstairs to his own bed, where Leo's words kept him from sleep for a long time. He tried to see things from Morgan's point of view and realized that his friend might be right. Why would she consider him as anything more than a hired man? What had he really done to persuade her otherwise?

Meanwhile, it was both disquieting and comforting that he'd finally told Leo *everything*

. Had it been foolish to do so? Was it dangerous in some way that Leo now knew his secret? At least Rhys hadn't had to struggle to convince his friend—the physical presence of the elyll verified his story.

Perhaps I should invite Ranyon to the farm to meet Morgan.

He snorted at the notion. Not that it wouldn't work, but he didn't want Morgan to believe because he'd brought her living evidence. He wanted her to believe him because—

Well, because she *trusted*

him. A man needed his woman to have faith in him. And there was no doubt that he wanted Morgan to be his. Truth be told, he wanted to be hers too. It put him in mind of the last family gathering, when his sister, Arwyn, wed one of his cousins, a blacksmith from a neighboring village. Arwyn was barely a year younger than Rhys, and she had learned to heft a sword when he did. She made up for her smaller stature by being bold and brave and

fast

, and had bloodied his nose more than once when they were growing up. Most of the time he'd

seen it coming—but not always. On this day, however, Arwyn didn't look anything like a sparring partner, or someone who was dangerous with both bow and dagger. She wore a fine red dress that showed off her dark hair plaited with flowers, and he remembered her smile as she held hands with Urien in the circle of their families. There'd been much happiness that day...

He sighed. Foolish to think of his family now after nearly twenty centuries had passed. Foolishness and folly. He thought he had come to terms with the loss of them over the long millennia. Instead, the hurt surprised him—both that the ache and the emptiness in his chest were still there and that the pain was still strong. No doubt it was Ranyon's tale of his aloneness, somewhat similar to Rhys's own, that had stirred up the memories like silt at the bottom of a deep pond.

Leo had said, “Always best to go forward if you can.” But for a long moment, Rhys allowed himself to imagine facing Morgan in that circle of everyone he loved, holding her hands in his own...

When he started imagining other parts of her he’d like to hold, he had a whole new set of thoughts to keep him awake.

THIRTEEN

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ome days it sucks to be a veterinarian.

It was a sign that one of Morgan’s professors had kept posted prominently in his classroom. She hadn’t understood at first—she’d had a huge supply of idealism that carried her for a long time. But by the time she’d graduated, reality had taken some of the shine off her idealism. She had no doubts about the career she’d chosen—she had a true passion for it—but she’d also come to realize that the best veterinary training in the world didn’t make that world a perfect place. There were aspects of her job that weren’t so lovable, plus a few things she just had to try to get through. Just like every other vocation in life.

Knowing that didn’t make it one bit easier when you were having one of those days.

Her morning had begun with a dental procedure on an eight-year-old border collie—a basic teeth cleaning. Rory’s owner brought him in annually for the procedure. Not all dogs needed it that often, but despite Rory’s general good health, he had dreadful teeth. Cindy, the senior tech, started the IV drip. When the dog relaxed, Morgan intubated him and administered the gas. With Cindy carefully monitoring the dog’s vital signs, Morgan began scaling and polishing the teeth. It should have gone like clockwork.

Instead, Rory stopped breathing. Quickly Morgan switched off the gas, removed the tube, and held the black-and-white muzzle closed, breathing into the nose while Cindy compressed the chest. One breath, three compressions. One breath, three compressions. Over and over. Nothing. She injected a respiratory stimulant. Nothing. Morgan tried everything she knew until sweat mingled with tears on her face. But the dog was simply, inexplicably
gone

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It hurt like hell to lose a patient. It hurt even more when she had no reason, no explanation, nothing to point to. The pre-op blood work had been normal. The anesthetic had been the same one used in Rory’s previous dental cleanings. Her favorite instructor had often said that sometimes things went wrong even if you did everything right—but it didn’t make it one bit easier to accept. Helplessness, anger, and grief flooded her gut.

After having to tell Rory’s owner that his canine friend had died while under her care, Morgan wanted to go home and punch something, pound nails, dig a hole to China, cry,

yell, something, anything to vent her emotions. But she had patients to see, and the waiting room was full. Jay and Grady were booked up too, so there was no way she was going to ask them to take over—even though she knew full well that they would do so gladly. Instead, she mentally

pulled up her socks

as Nainie had called it, and carried on.

Thankfully there were no more surgeries on her slate. Instead, Morgan made her way through a sea of vaccinations and checkups, pregnancy checks and digestive upsets, skin conditions, infections, ticks, and ear mites. Normal, everyday things. Slowly, gradually, she eased into the rhythm of the work. As if sensing her distress, her patients seemed unusually cooperative. By the end of the day, her eyes felt gritty, her back ached, and she could

swear her feet were threatening to sue her, but she'd regained a somewhat fragile equilibrium—especially after a comical pair of pugs stood on the exam table and insisted on licking her face while she tried to listen to their hearts.

The phone rang three minutes before closing. The receptionist was already gone so she could make a deposit before the bank closed, so Morgan reached for the receiver herself. Late calls were never good news, and this one was no different. The O'Neils' cat had been hit by a car and was on his way to the clinic—and Jay and Grady were both out on farm calls.

Her techs were looking at her for direction. Cindy had taken Rory's death every bit as hard as Morgan—perhaps harder, judging from her red eyes. It would be natural to let her go home, but it might not be a kindness. What if Cindy took it as a lack of confidence in her skills? Morgan sighed inwardly. She wouldn't mind going home and having a damn good cry herself, but right now another animal needed help, and *somebody*

had to keep it together, somebody had to be a leader. She elected to offer a choice.

"You heard the phone call," she said to her staff. "We've got an emergency on its way. Cindy, do you want to take another chance on my surgical skills, or do the three of you want to draw straws and see who gets stuck with me?"

"I'm staying," said Cindy.

Russell and Melinda looked at each other. "Us too," said Melly.

Just then Jack O'Neil came bursting in the front door with the blanket-wrapped feline in his arms, and everyone sprang into action. The bloodied blanket was removed as Norman the cat was quickly and carefully prepped for surgery, and Morgan felt her heart stutter. The damage was extensive...

*Crap. Not again,
please not again.*

The good part was that the poor cat wasn't conscious, so he wasn't suffering at the moment. The bad part was that Morgan knew that the chances of saving him were slim to none.

She also knew that she had to try, that she would give it her best and then some, anyway.

Rhys found Leo sitting in a chair in the kitchen staring at the strangely ornamented coffee cup on the table. Around him, countertops gleamed, the sink shone, and the windows were spotless. Every dish was clean and put away, the floor swept and washed. And the living room held even more surprises than the kitchen. Leo had always kept the place tidy, but this was more than mere cleanliness. The colors and textures of the furniture, the walls, even the drapes—all looked fresh and bright instead of faded and worn.

“New as the day Tina and I bought them,” Leo had whispered, as if Ranyon might somehow hear him. The ellyll’s snores could still be heard from the second floor. “And all the worn spots on the arms of my recliner and the tear in the couch cushion? Gone, like they’d never happened.”

“The ellyllon are masters at making charms. They use an older magic than even the Tylwyth Teg command.”

“I don’t know what to say to him,” said Leo, glancing over at the stairs.

“Surely you don’t fear him now? Your thanks will be sufficient, and your company. He’s just a creature alone as you and I are, and if he’s done this, then he’s determined to be your friend.”

“I would have been his friend without all this.” Leo waved a hand around.

“Aye, you would have. And that’s why he likes you. You show great kindness to all and expect no favors. You’re a good man, Leo.”

The old man recovered himself then. “Well, all I know is that this kitchen is too damn clean,” he declared, getting up from the chair and straightening his suspenders. “Gives me the heebie-jeebies, and I’m going to do something about it.”

Rhys nodded. “I’ll go put the workshop to rights then. The tools are still scattered about.”

An hour and a half later, Rhys returned to find that Ranyon had been lured from sleep by the aroma of freshly baked apple pies cooling on the kitchen table. “Fair day to ya! Smells like this side of paradise,” grinned the ellyll as he scrambled to get up on a kitchen chair.

“A good morning for sure, and we’re gonna start it off right,” said Leo. He plopped several scoops of vanilla ice cream on top of a still-warm pie, stuck a large spoon in it, and pushed it in front of the ellyll. “Oh, and one more thing.” He pinned a dish towel around Ranyon’s neck as a bib of sorts. “You don’t want to go getting your leaves all sticky.”

Sighing happily, the little creature dug into the treat with a will. When Leo left to drive Rhys to the farm, Ranyon couldn’t speak for all the food in his mouth. He could only wave with one of his long-fingered hands, his eyes half-closed in pie-induced ecstasy.

Rhys had hoped to catch sight of Morgan in the morning, but she'd left for the clinic long before Leo dropped him off. He put his pie in the fridge—Leo wasn't about to let him leave without one—and turned his attention to Lucy and to the work he'd planned out for the day. By evening, Rhys was anticipating Morgan's visit to the stable, but a pale crescent moon had cleared the horizon before her car pulled into the driveway.

From the barn he saw her enter the house. Two hours later, he guessed she wasn't coming out to visit. No doubt she needed sleep more than company at the end of such a long day, but it was a disappointment just the same. He chided himself and checked Lucy one last time, then climbed into his own bed in the next stall. The mare was doing well enough that she likely didn't need such watching. He could sleep in his own quarters now and have no fear for her. Truth be told, however, he preferred to bed down where the scent of hay and straw and horse was familiar and comforting.

As always, he woke the moment Lucy stirred in her stall. Rhys listened carefully in the darkness, ready to get up and see to the mare, but she shifted and settled again of her own accord. Rhys rolled over, but found himself unable to go back to sleep. He was also unable to steer his thoughts away from Morgan. Was something wrong?

He rose and dressed in the dark, then slipped through the barn door like a shadow, hoping not to disturb the horse. The night was cloudless, the height of the moon and the position of the stars announcing it was well past midnight. There was no sense of danger, no instinct that prompted him to seek a weapon, yet Rhys was disquieted. He walked around the buildings, seeing nothing out of the ordinary, until he passed the old garage and could see the house. A blanket-wrapped figure was sitting on the porch swing.

Morgan was staring off at the constellations climbing above the eastern horizon, when suddenly she felt

his

presence, just as she did in so many of her dreams of late. Had she fallen asleep at long last? She turned her head to find Rhys standing at the bottom of the porch steps. *How does he manage to look so tall even there?*