

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (21 page)

Rhys mounted the last of the nest boxes on the inside wall of the old granary. The tiny building had been empty for years, from the looks of it, but the roof was sound. It would make a fine chicken coop. It was late in the year to find chicks, but perhaps someone would give up a few hens rather than overwinter them. He wondered what breeds there might be in this country.

And ducks

, he reminded himself.

There should be a few ducks here as well to eat the garden slugs in the spring.

Some waterfowl would look fine on the pond across from the house. Morgan would like it, he was sure.

He stood back to admire his work and nodded approvingly. He'd always been good with his hands, and Leo had been tutoring him on modern building methods. He didn't agree with all of them of course—after all, a Celtic roundhouse was of sturdy construction, perhaps stronger than Morgan's own house. And some of the materials used in this time seemed flimsy. Yet he enjoyed the learning, and Leo kept him supplied with books on building. Rhys read them religiously, determined to learn everything he could, not only to fit into this world but to thrive in it. Accordingly, he'd insulated the walls of the coop against the coming cold weather and installed a small window he'd chosen from a stack in the barn.

Now he was contemplating ducks, of all things, and it felt completely natural.

Rhys considered what a surprise and a relief that was. After years of battle, some men found that they could only be warriors, that they were no longer at home in the world they had fought to protect. He'd thought that might happen to him. As the Bringer of Death, his world had been awash in blood and carnage—first fighting the Romans, then fighting for his life in the arena. After all that, how would he ever be able to return to who he was? Or be anything else but a destroyer?

Yet here he was. Surrounded by fertile land that called to him and work that was satisfying. It was the way of his people to grow crops and tend cattle—and in this short time, he'd come to know that he

could

live that life again. Perhaps all the centuries of watching humanity had eased some of the lust for battle in him. And like water over rock, the countless years seemed to have worn down the worst of his memories, so he wasn't as haunted as some. He had good friends, and best of all, he had a woman who stirred his heart.

By all the gods, he'd relived those recent kisses countless times. He was restless, left wanting so much more than Morgan was prepared to give. She'd pulled back after he'd kissed her under the stars, and he didn't know if she was afraid of him or of herself. Probably both. His strange story troubled her deeply, yet she was undeniably attracted. A quandary to be sure, and one she refused to share.

Ha.

As if he wasn't sharing in the hell of it just the same.

He was startled out of his reverie by the barely audible sound of a footstep outside. Hammer in hand, Rhys sprang from the newly refurbished coop in a heartbeat only to discover Jay Browning trying to take a step back, tripping, and falling on his backside.

"Easy boy," said Jay, his voice a bit shaky and his eyes wide. "It's just me."

"Aye, I remember you just fine." Rhys lowered the hammer, tossing it to one side and offering the younger man a hand up. "I didn't know anyone was here."

"I walked in from the road." Jay dusted himself off, still eyeing Rhys with apprehension. "Starr's picking some of Morgan's crab apples there. I'm damn glad she didn't come up here with me. You'd have scared her with that hammer."

So much for thinking that he was no longer a warrior or that he could blithely be a simple farmer. Habits died hard—even after centuries, his reflexes were battle sharp. Rhys sighed inwardly. "I apologize for that. 'Twas only instinct."

"Yeah, well, that's one of the things I want to talk to you about. Your instincts are out of this world. You've got some incredible skills, and the guys and I have learned a lot from you. I can't wait to use some of this stuff at the Ren fair coming up. What I want to know right now, though, is where did you learn to fight?"

Rhys was silent for a long moment. He hadn't expected anyone to ask him outright. It was one thing to omit the truth and allow people to fill in the blanks on their own. It was another to lie baldly, and he didn't have a taste for that. "Tell me why it is you want to know," he countered.

Jay folded his arms over a black T-shirt with white letters on it—"If the zombies chase us, I'm tripping you." "I know what you told Morgan when she found you. You're not from around here, and you're a helluva lot older than you look. You've been a Celtic warrior, a gladiator, and a dog. Some malicious fairies put a spell on you, and Morgan broke it.

"So I came here this afternoon when I knew Morgan would be busy orienting Tyler, our new veterinarian. She thinks I'm out on a farm call, but I wanted to talk to

you

, buddy. I want to hear from your own mouth if some, or all, of your story's true."

Rhys studied the man. His face was open and honest—and dead serious. "Do you believe I told Morgan the truth?" he asked Jay at last.

"I think I do."

"And if you have my word on it, what will you do then?"

Jay grinned. “Pester you with a million questions about the past, hope for more weaponry lessons, and invite you to our next fair. Other than that, not a damn thing. I’ll keep your secret, even from my friends—but not from Starr, you understand—and you have my word on *that*.”

They gripped hands, yet Rhys was puzzled. “Why is it you accept the truth and yet Morgan does not?”

“Well, for myself, your story explains a helluva lot—like why you can ride a horse like you’re part of it and use weapons like a Jedi Master, yet driving and phoning and changing channels on the TV don’t seem to be in your box of skills. Not to mention that walking around naked has been out of style since the sixties.”

Aye, thought Rhys. He’d suspected he wouldn’t be living that down.

“As for Morgan,” Jay continued, “I have to give you fair warning first. She likes you. A lot. In fact, I’ve never seen her so lit up. I’m guessing you like her too?”

Rhys nodded. “A great deal more than *like*.”

“Then one of the things I’m here to tell you today is don’t break her heart. As her unofficial big brother, I’d have to get medieval on you, and I doubt that I could take you—but believe me, I’d try. And so would Grady and the guys who were at practice, and probably at least a couple dozen or so of her clients who love her and care about her. Understand?”

“Plainly.”

“Good. I can check that off my list. So as far as her belief system goes, you gotta understand that Morgan has worked very hard to earn her veterinary stripes. It takes *years*

, Rhys. She’s been busy studying while most people are off building relationships and trying things out and figuring out who they are. Then her grandma died while she was at school, and I think Morgan coped with the loss by digging even deeper into her studies. So she’s devoted herself to facts, Rhys, to *science*

. She’s safe there. And it’s not because she doesn’t feel, but because she *does* feel,

and deeply—she uses her knowledge and skills to serve the animals she cares so much about.”

“And what about me?”

“Well, you’re different. She cares about you plenty, as I said, but your story just doesn’t stand up against accepted science.”

Rhys had seen the march of progress over the centuries. “Science once said the sun revolved around the earth. That didn’t make it true.”

“I know. But eventually it was overcome by proof. I don’t think we can prove your story to Morgan.”

He could, actually, but he didn’t want to. “I’d rather she trusted me.”

Jay simply shrugged. “For both your sakes, I hope she comes around sooner rather than later. I think her exceptional heart will lead her to the truth—but it could take a helluva long time, so you’re going to have to be patient.”

More of the same, then. Well, patient he could be. “My thanks to you for your honesty and also for your trust. Morgan is fortunate to have such a friend. So—were you saying something about a fair?”

“There’s a Renaissance fair in two weeks,” said Jay. “The guys and I were wondering if you’d join our team for the medieval combat events. We’ll follow your lead, adopt whatever strategy you decide on. And we’ll practice with you from now until then so we don’t embarrass you too much. But, um…” He looked uncomfortable. “There’s just one catch, Rhys—it’s not real, okay? The whole event is for entertainment. You’ll have to promise not to kill anybody.”

“Well, now,” said Rhys. “There goes all the fun of it.”

He burst out laughing at Jay’s horrified expression and clapped him on the shoulder. “I’ll be proud to join your little band. And you have my word, I’ll not be slaying anyone.”

I hope this is a good idea.

Morgan slowed the car, straining to keep a watchful eye on the gravel road and read the mailboxes at the same time. Good idea or not, she was determined. She’d taken Rhys’s exquisite carving into the house that morning and set it on the floor next to the stone fireplace. The beautiful wooden dog seemed to belong there, and yet she felt there was something missing, something huge.

Maybe she couldn’t have Rhyswr, but the great black canine had shown her that she had ample room in her home and her life and her heart for a dog. A big one.

She’d considered going to a reputable breeder, and she’d talked to many wonderful people over the phone and in person when trying to find Rhyswr’s owners. But while she might have room in her busy life for a canine companion, a young puppy would need far more attention, training, and routine. Besides, Rhyswr had saved her life. Maybe she couldn’t do anything for the big black dog now, but she could pay the gift forward and save the life of another dog. Sure, rescued dogs weren’t necessarily perfect—but the dog wouldn’t be getting a perfect owner either. And she’d witnessed in her own practice that simple love really could work wonders.

A few minutes later, she wondered why she hadn’t done it sooner. Gentle Giant Rescue was located on a farm that was even older than her own. The owner, Ellen Gunderson,

had a red bandanna tied over her white hair. Her startling blue eyes looked out from a weathered face, but there was kindness in them and laugh lines around them. She led Morgan along a long row of spacious grassy runs shaded by trees. Each run had a doghouse that looked to be the size of a garden shed.

“This here’s my

pony

farm,” Ellen laughed. “It’s been an extra-warm day so most of the dogs are lying around. Since you’re a vet, you probably already know that mastiffs can’t tolerate a lot of heat.” She clapped her hands together loudly. “C’mon, boys and girls, we have a visitor.”

Enormous canines emerged from their sleeping spots. Several had been in their doghouses, others in hollowed-out spaces under the trees. Ellen went from pen to pen, introducing Morgan to each of the dogs, fourteen in all. Most were English mastiffs with fawn coats, the familiar tawny color with black masks. Five more were brindle, having stripes and streaks of gray or brown in a darker or lighter coat. One had a bright golden coat with black stripes.

“That’s Tigger,” chuckled Ellen. “You can see how she got that name. And this one over here is Roy, and the charcoal-gray one standing by your elbow is Andre. Andre’s a Neapolitan mastiff from Italy. We don’t see too many of those. Gertie, Duggan, and Diesel are bullmastiffs. That’s a pure breed too. And then there’s Tank—he’s a mix. A little Anatolian shepherd, a little Great Dane, and a sprinkle of Newfoundland, I think.”

“Whatever he is, he’s certainly big,” said Morgan, trying to pet him and getting her hands washed with his massive tongue. “He’s even taller than the mastiffs, and I didn’t think that was possible.”

“Narrower though. Some of our mastiffs weigh well over two hundred, and he’s more like one hundred sixty or so.”

Still bigger than me. Sheesh!

“Thank goodness they’re friendly.”

“They’ve all got pretty good temperaments, at least toward people. Minnie and Apollo, now, they don’t like other dogs much. The rest are fine with just about anything, even cats.”