

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

KATE
HILL

WINTER
STALLION

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Winter Stallion

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WINTER STALLION

Kate Hill

Chapter One

Found in the Storm

Phillipa smiled at her nephew, Canyon, and took the lace faerie from his hand to hang it above the window. Usually a busy messenger, she was happy to spend Unity Feast, a worldwide holiday, visiting her brother and his family in Hornview. Unity Feast celebrated the alliance between Horsemen and Humans.

For as long as anyone could remember, both races had depended on one another for survival. If not for the Horsemen, who changed from full man form to that of half man and half winged horse, The Plague that struck randomly throughout the world would have long ago destroyed the human race.

The Plague affected humans alone and Rock Blood was its only cure. Rock Blood, a substance with a hard outer skin and a liquefied center, was found underground either in the frigid Spikelands or the sweltering tropics. Both regions were unlivable for most creatures and separated from civilization by vast oceans filled with deadly flesh-eating plants known to drag down ships and devour all on board. The Horsemen flew humans safely over the sea to gather Rock Blood and deliver it to villages where it was needed.

Though humans depended upon Horsemen, the powerful creatures relied on humans for their survival as well. Since no female Horsemen existed, human women mated with them. Fortunately, most women found the charismatic shapeshifters irresistible. In spite of Horsemen's raw virility, it was difficult to conceive a child with one and the most successful couples met through dream sharing.

According to legend, when a Horseman and a human woman shared dreams, they were meant to be together. The pull between them was almost irresistible, as if the dreams were nature's way of matching couples who would most likely conceive and therefore ensure the continuance of the Horsemen's noble race. Male children from such a union were invariably Horsemen and female children usually shared a unique bond with true-horses.

As the daughter of a Horseman, Phillipa had used her talent with true-horses to begin her own messenger service. For over ten years, she and her horses had carried messages throughout the North. This visit with her family was a welcome vacation.

Unfortunately, her brother, Terra, and his wife, Inez, had been called away for an emergency in a southern village. Terra was a Fighting Carrier, one of a group of elite Horsemen warriors who dedicated their lives to gathering Rock Blood. Though private Carriers earned a good profit from making the grueling and treacherous flights to gather Rock Blood, Fighting Carriers earned less, but were generally far more respected.

Most villages had at least one Fighting Carrier assigned to them and the highest-ranking Fighting Carrier's word took precedence over all others, including private

Carriers. Terra had earned a high rank and for years had taught at the Hall of Fighting Carriers where the elite warriors trained. His speed record for the fastest flight to the Spikelands and back had yet to be broken. Phillipa was quite proud of him and had been happy when he'd finally met and married his dream lover, Inez.

Inez was a Gatherer, trained to ride Carriers and gather Rock Blood. She and Terra were a perfect match and, in a way, Phillipa envied them. She'd never shared dreams with a Horseman, nor had she met any male who had interested her enough to contemplate marriage. A free spirit by nature, she didn't like the idea of being bound to a man who expected her to become nothing more than a possession, an extension of himself. There were so few ways for a woman to gain independence in her world, but she had managed to do it by becoming a messenger.

Canyon giggled and picked up another lace faerie.

"That's a pretty one," Phillipa said, extending her hand to the toddler. "Give her to me and I'll hang her over the door. This house will be decorated for Unity Feast by the time your parents get home."

The boy did as she asked, then jogged around the spacious room. He'd only recently started shifting to his half horse form and had all too quickly lost the wobbliness in his legs. Now he was harder to catch than ever when he raced around in bursts of youthful energy. Thank goodness Horsemen didn't develop enough strength in their wings to start flying until they reached six or seven years of age.

She was just about to hang the faerie over the door when someone knocked.

"Who is it?"

"Samuel."

Phillipa's brow furrowed. Samuel was a messenger she knew from a village farther south. She opened the door and he staggered in, looking half frozen and exhausted.

"What's wrong?" she demanded, offering him a steadying hand.

"My horse and I galloped from Fort Range. We can't go any more. I have an urgent message that needs to be delivered to the Chieftain of Midnight Cove."

"That's several miles from here," Phillipa said.

"I went to your village square and was told the local messengers are out on deliveries and most of the Horsemen have dispersed for the winter."

"That's true. My brother and his friend, Moor, are covering an emergency Gathering Party and I believe there is one injured Carrier around, but he can't fly right now."

"Phillipa, this message is about a couple of runaways who've been found. The parents must be beside themselves —"

"Give me the message, then you and your horse get to the village square and rest. The Chieftain will put you up. I'll bring my nephew to stay with my friend Susana and then make the delivery."

Samuel closed his eyes in relief. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

A short time later, Phillipa stood in the doorway of Susana's home. Susana was married to Moor, a respected Carrier and good friend of Terra and Inez.

"I already gave Canyon lunch and he's been doing great with the potty training, even in his equine form, so there shouldn't be any accidents on the carpet," Phillipa said as she placed Canyon on the floor. The boy immediately joined Susana's young daughter who sat playing with wooden blocks. "Thanks for watching him, Susana."

"It's not a problem at all. Just be very careful, Phillipa. The snow has been getting worse over the past hour."

"I'll be fine." Phillipa smiled, glancing toward her favorite horse, Black Silk. She and the stallion had traveled through terrible weather and difficult terrain, but had always managed to make their deliveries. "We'll be back by nightfall."

"Ride safely," Susana added.

Phillipa waved to her as she walked to Black Silk and mounted.

Though snow fell steadily on her way to Midnight Cove, she delivered the message without issue. Halfway home, dusk had fallen and the snow thickened so much it became difficult to see. The path home cut directly through a forest and Phillipa felt an unfamiliar twinge of fear when the storm picked up. The last thing she needed was to get lost in the forest. She and Black Silk could freeze to death.

A great swirl of wind and snow forced them to a stop. Phillipa buried her face in her wool scarf, trying to protect her eyes and nose from the icy gusts. Something struck her hard on the head and the world went black.

* * * * *

Luther Woodfield-Shire stomped ice and snow from his hooves before stepping into the one-room cottage where he'd lived for the past month. Located in a stretch of woods between the villages of Hornview and Midnight Cove, it provided the seclusion he wanted. He'd spent much time stuck in a village longhouse under the watchful eyes of healers. After the *incident*, he needed time away from everyone and everything to gather his thoughts and decide what to do about his life.

He'd spent eighteen years as a Fighting Carrier. Perhaps the incident had been a sign for him to retire. He thought for certain after what happened he would have been discharged from the Fighting Carriers, but for some reason no one seemed to believe that he, the Horseman in charge of a destroyed Gathering Party, was to blame.

Thinking of the Horsemen and humans who had died violent, watery deaths, he closed his eyes, as if trying to block out the memory, but it was impossible. With a sigh, he walked to the fireplace, dropped an armload of wood beside it and tossed in a couple more logs.

The night had grown so cold that even with his naturally high body temperature, characteristic of all Horsemen, he felt the need for a fire. He paused for a moment and

concentrated on his Turning Point, the area on a Horseman's lower back where shapeshifting originated, enabling him to change from two human legs to four equine ones. With a shudder that made the wooden floor ripple, he changed to Huform.

Naked, he walked to the bed, flopped atop it and stared at the ceiling. After a short rest, he'd make dinner and read before going to sleep. For the past weeks he'd been easing himself back into heavy work—longer flights while carrying a weighted saddle on his back.

For a time after the incident, the healers thought he might never recover enough to return to active duty. To a Horseman like Luther, a permanent breakdown was a fate worse than death, but perhaps that was exactly what he deserved. Yet he had slowly recovered, at least in body.

Even if he regained all his physical capabilities, he might never return to the Fighting Carriers. The responsibility he'd once shouldered with confidence now seemed like an impossible burden. One he wasn't sure he wanted any longer.

Without being fully aware of it, he drifted to sleep and the dream overtook him with breathtaking clarity.

One moment he lay in bed and the next he found himself plowing through knee-deep snow, shivering with the cold. It took seconds for him to change into his beast-half, then sprout a full-coat, a layer of hair Horsemen could summon at will. It covered them from head to toe and was often used in the North to protect them from the frigid winter weather.

The full-coat did its job and kept in much of Luther's body heat so he could stride more comfortably through the woods. This was by far the most intense dream he'd ever had. Both disturbing and compelling. He needed to keep going on.

"Help me!"

He paused, his sensitive ears twitching and straining to hear the faint female voice.

"Over here. Please," she called again.

Luther turned and cantered toward the voice. The icy wind cut across his face, but it was little hindrance to a Horseman accustomed to flying in the frigid Spikelands. In the distance, he saw a dark heap partially covered by snow. As he approached, the figure lifted its head and he saw it was a woman. A beautiful woman with brilliant blue eyes and long black hair caked with ice and snow. By the bluish tinge to her skin, he knew she was dangerously close to freezing.

Her eyes opened halfway and he gazed into their vibrant depths.

"Who are you?" she murmured.

"Luther."

A slight smile played around her lips and he couldn't resist kissing her. As soon as their lips touched, a feeling of intense pleasure such as he'd never experienced before darted through him, but he also felt how cold she was and knew he needed to get her to

safety. Once he did, he'd have to kiss her again just to be sure that unimaginable feeling was real.

He gathered her into his arms and stood.

"Luther," she breathed and rested her head against his shoulder. "I owe you."

"Just tell me your name and we'll call it even."

Once again her gaze met his. "Phillipa."

Luther snapped awake, his heart pounding. In his mind, he could still see the woman and hear her voice. Instinct told him this wasn't an ordinary dream. Somewhere in the forest, the woman was hurt.

"This is madness," he muttered, but left the bed. Quickly he changed to his beast-half and sprouted his full-coat. He left the cottage and walked to the small barn behind it, where he put on a light riding saddle and stashed a blanket in the pack.

Moments later he was cantering through the woods. Wind howled through the trees and the weather had grown colder than before he'd fallen asleep. An injured woman wouldn't survive long out here.

The whinny of a horse drew his attention and he listened carefully. His sensitive hearing detected more snorts and whinnies above the screaming wind. Through the squalls, he saw a large black stallion nosing around a dark figure lying on the ground.

He approached carefully, not wishing to spook the stallion. Though most true-horses instinctively trusted Horsemen, he knew many frightened easily. Still, he guessed if the animal had remained by his rider, he would be too loyal to leave her side for almost any reason. He spoke softly to the horse, who quivered and watched him with wary eyes, but stood his ground as Luther knelt by the figure and rolled it onto its back.

An indescribable feeling darted through him when he saw it was indeed the woman from his dream. If possible, she was even more beautiful in spite of her half-frozen, disheveled state. She was also quite tall, probably around his own six feet, which was his height in Huform.

She shivered badly and when he touched her cheek, it felt like a piece of ice. He wasted no more time before taking the blanket from his saddle pack and wrapping her in it. He took her horse's reins and tied them to the pommel of his saddle, then lifted the woman in his arms and made his way home.

* * * * *

Phillipa awoke in a warm bed in an unfamiliar, yet cozy room. A fire danced in the hearth, its pleasant, smoky scent wafting on the air. A high-backed chair stood by the fire and across the room was a round wooden breakfast table with two matching chairs. At the foot of the large bed, she noticed the top of a carved oak trunk.

Her first thought was, oddly, of a Horseman whom she'd dreamed about in her unconscious state. Just imagining him made her pulse quicken with the most lustful

feeling she'd ever experienced. He'd been gorgeous, this Horseman from her dream. His full-coat and equine-half were pure white and his long human hair pale gold. It blew around his broad shoulders like silk in the wind. Though not incredibly tall, he was above average height for a Horseman.

Both his horse and man halves were so perfectly proportioned that he could only exist in a dream. Even beneath his full-coat, his incredibly handsome features were easily discernable. A large, well-shaped nose characteristic of many Horsemen, a square jaw and enormous blue eyes intense enough to melt a glacier.

Strange that in a dream with such a perfect Horseman, she had still felt cold and sore from the fall she'd taken. Maybe she had been awake after all but was hallucinating. Then the Horseman had taken her in his arms and kissed her. His warm, powerful body had chased away the chill in her bones and she'd wanted nothing more than to stay in his embrace forever. In a deep, smooth voice, he'd told her his name. *Luther.*

Phillipa shook her head, then drew a sharp breath as the motion caused discomfort. Now that the dream had faded, reality set in. She touched a hand to the tender spot on the back of her head and grew anxious. She'd been on her way home from delivering the message to Midnight Cove when something had struck her off Black Silk.

Black Silk! Where was her horse? She pushed herself to a sitting position, almost wincing at the soreness in her muscles. It felt as if she'd fallen pretty hard, though she didn't think she'd broken any bones. She had absolutely no memory of arriving at this cottage, nor did she recall changing from her clothes into the linen shirt and trousers that were almost the perfect length for her, yet too big.

Her bare feet touched the scatter rug beside the bed and she sat for a moment, her hands pressing into the mattress. She was about to stand and look for the owner of the cottage when the door opened and in stepped the man from her dream.

An inexplicable thrill rushed through her at the sight of him. A combination of desire, fear and something so deep she could scarcely imagine such emotions connected to a man she'd just laid eyes upon.

Their gazes locked and she saw him draw a deep breath, as if this moment was as monumental to him as it was to her. Those large blue eyes with the corners tilted up like an elf's widened a bit and gleamed with the same intensity as in her dream. The tips of his pointed Horseman ears poked through his long, silky hair. She noted two earrings, one gold hoop and one sapphire stud, pierced the very tip of one ear. It was unusual for Horsemen in these parts to have pierced ears.

"By the gods," she murmured. "Luther."

"Phillipa," he said, quickly regaining his composure. He stomped snow from his boots and managed to close the door against the drifts that had fallen in. Then he strode toward her. She noted he was in his Huform, dressed in a long cloak covered in a layer of ice and snow. He also wore a shirt, breeches and boots. Luther placed his hand

beneath her chin and tilted her face toward his, studying her carefully. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore, but other than that fine. I..." She paused, unsure of how to continue. Though she knew about the dream sharing between Horsemen and their destined mates, she had been certain it would never happen to her. All her life, she'd been independent. Free of the burden so many women carried—the burden of *wanting* or *needing* a husband. Surely someone of her nature wouldn't be predisposed to sharing dreams with a Horseman?

"Do you remember what happened to you?" he asked, removing his cloak and tossing it aside. The shirt and breeches were damp where the ice and snow had seeped through the front of his cloak.

It seemed odd having such a mundane conversation with a man whom she'd met in a dream and whose presence quickened her pulse. A barrage of inappropriate thoughts filled her mind. She imagined them locked naked in an passionate embrace, of whispering secrets only lovers shared.

This was utter madness, yet wasn't there a bit of craziness in shared dreams that compelled two strangers to experience almost irresistible passion?

"Yes. I was riding through the woods and something hit me on the head. I can only assume it was ice blown off a tree. My horse. Black Silk. Where is he—"

"He's in the barn and perfectly safe. I just came from checking on him. Now I suggest you get back in bed and I'll bring you tea and something to eat."

"I can't." She stood and found they were just about at eye level. Not surprising, considering she was taller than most humans and the equal height of many Horsemen. It was part of her bloodline. Most daughters of Horsemen were quite tall.

Luther was much bigger built than she was, his shoulders broad and chest wide, the mark of tremendous stamina among his kind. She could practically feel the power in him and it sent a thrill of desire darting through her.

The smoldering look in his eyes told her that the passion she felt wasn't one-sided. The faintest smile touched his finely shaped lips and the urge to kiss him almost overcame her.

She cleared her throat and tried to step away. "I need to get back to Hornview. My nephew is waiting for me."

He cocked an eyebrow and sidestepped, blocking her path. Placing his hands gently, yet firmly, on her shoulders, he pushed her onto the edge of the bed. "Back to Hornview? Not tonight you won't be."

"Excuse me?" she demanded. What the hell was he talking about? Another hint of fear struck her. She was stuck in a strange cottage with a Horseman she didn't know who seemed bent on forcing her back into bed. As much as he aroused her, she had no wish to be ravaged by any man. She stood abruptly and with such force that her head started aching again. "Get out of my way!"

"Don't upset yourself."

"I'm not upsetting myself, you horse's ass! You're upsetting me. If you don't let me off this bed, there's going to be trouble."

"There's no need to be rude," he snapped. A glacial look crept into those gorgeous eyes. In spite of his reserved manner, he possessed a toughness that raised more questions in her mind and warned her to remain cautious. "I'm trying to see to your comfort while you're here."

"I told you I'm leaving."

"And I told you there's no way you can get to Hornview tonight. The snow is thigh-deep out there and still falling so heavily that even if I wanted to fly you out of here, there's absolutely no visibility."

She stared at him for a dumbfounded moment, then pushed past him toward the door. This time he let her go. She pulled it open and again snow tumbled in. Great gusts of wind blew in her face and she squinted in the icy swirls on a backdrop of utter blackness. It took her a moment to force the door shut, then she turned to him.

His arms folded across his chest, he wore a gloating expression that she longed to slap off his handsome face. Gods, how could a man be compelling, yet at the same time thoroughly annoying?

"Convinced?" he asked, an amused smile on his lips.

"This is terrible." She began pacing the room, ignoring any lingering soreness and pain in her head. At least Canyon was safe with Susana, but what if she was stuck here for days? It could happen, depending on the weather.

"Surely my company isn't *that* bad," he said.

She stopped abruptly and stared at him. Goodness, how ungrateful she must sound. He had, after all, saved her life. Still, the last thing she wanted was to be snowed in with a man she'd shared a dream with. Or had she? Now it was starting to fade. Probably because he stood right there in the flesh, watching her with those soul-stealing eyes, unbuttoning his shirt and slipping it off...

Heavens, what a gorgeous chest! Broad, dusted with golden hair and made of lean, sculpted muscle. He had not a bit of spare flesh on his sides or that stomach with those rows of muscles she longed to trace with her fingertips. In the dream he'd looked too perfect to be real, but he *was* real after all. This wasn't just an average Horseman, but one of Fighting Carrier quality. Again she thought of that underlying toughness revealed in his look from a moment ago. She realized a complex Horseman stood before her, yet at the moment she found it difficult to think about his complexity or anything else when faced with his magnificent body.

Her brother, Terra, was considered exceptionally well-formed, but Phillipa had never seen any Horseman like this. He was flowing, yet compact, and even in Huform moved with grace and precision seen only in the finest warriors and athletes.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's not your company that's the problem. Would you like me to turn around while you change clothes?" She did so before he had a chance to reply.

"If you feel more comfortable," he said.

That had been a stupid question she'd asked. Modesty wasn't a Horseman trait. They usually wore clothing only in the presence of humans or during the cold weather. *Please, oh please don't let him be the sort who walks around his house naked. That would be too much to resist...*

"I'm sure having me here is an inconvenience for you," she said.

"I'm decent, Phillipa. You may face me without fear." Somehow he managed to sound both regal and teasing. That cultured voice and the playful tone aroused her more than she wanted to admit.

"I'm not afraid." She spun, flinging him another annoyed look. He'd changed into loose trousers and another shirt. Though she should be completely relieved, she already longed to look upon his bare torso again, to enjoy the pleasing arrangement of sleek muscles and pale skin touched by a bit of gold.

"Then what is the problem, if not my company?"

"People will be worried about me."

"As they should be. What were you doing out in this storm anyway?"

"Delivering a message."

"Shouldn't a messenger have done that?"

Her anger bristled. It would take Horseman arrogance to assume that a woman couldn't possibly be a messenger. "I *am* a messenger."

"Ah." He nodded. "Didn't mean to offend you."

Her pulse quickening, she moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue before asking the one question that would finally put everything into perspective. Though she already knew the answer, she needed to be absolutely sure. "Luther, how did you happen to find me? What were *you* doing in the woods during the storm?"

"I was looking for you, of course. I saw you in a dream. You called for help."

Phillipa sighed, walked to the bed and sat down rather unsteadily.

"Are you all right?" he asked, obviously concerned. He knelt in front of her and took her hand. Those piercing eyes, now softened with gentleness that warmed her to the core, gazed into hers. Gods, she could lose herself in his eyes. She needed to maintain a semblance of control, but it was difficult. Never in her life had she reacted to a man in this way and this strange power he held over her terrified her. Normally she would have done her best to turn him away, but the one thing that frightened her more than her attraction to him was the thought of allowing him to slip through her fingers. "If you need a healer, I will make it through the storm."

"No." She smiled slightly, touched by his offer. She'd seen the terrible weather and if he went out, there was a good chance he'd get lost even with his Horseman strength

and senses. Not only did he seem courageous, but he obviously had some feeling for her as well. "I'm sure I'll be fine, thanks to you. Not many people would have braved this storm just for a dream."

"That wasn't just any dream, Phillipa." His hand squeezed hers a bit tighter. "You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I figured that out when we knew each other's names, though we've never met before," she snapped. Phillipa still felt torn between arousal and annoyance. After so many years of carefully planning her life fate had seen fit to send her a dream lover. Not that he had any control over it and who was to say he wasn't just as confused about their situation as she was? "I'm sorry. This isn't your fault any more than it's mine."

For a second, his seemingly unshakable confidence appeared to waver and his eyes widened a bit. "You're not...you're not married, are you?"

"No." Goodness. It hadn't occurred to her that he might think she, his dream lover, was already committed to someone else. Even worse, was he committed? Though she wasn't completely at ease with the thought of having a dream lover, now that she'd met him, she wasn't so sure how easy it would be to let him go. "Are you married?"

His lips flickered in smile. "No."

Phillipa nodded, unsettled by the feeling of relief that washed over her. She withdrew her hand from his and stood. He also rose to his feet and remained standing, his gaze fixed on her as she paced the room.

"How do you feel about this?" she asked. "I mean, neither of us are all that young."

"You can't be more than twenty."

"Cute." She forced a smile, wondering if he spoke the truth or was merely trying to flatter her. "I'm thirty. And you?"

"Thirty-five."

Her gaze raked him from head to toe. In spite of his youthful physique and sinfully handsome face, she thought him a little older than what he claimed. His eyes, though beautiful, were rather heavily lined with dark shadows beneath. Though he didn't look haggard exactly, he had the appearance of someone who had seen the harsher side of life.

"You know I'm a messenger. How do you earn a living?"

His gaze flickered away from hers and he walked to the fire. The flames already blazed high, so it wasn't necessary for him to pick up the poker and prod the wood, yet he did so. It didn't take a fortune teller to know her question disturbed him. She'd only asked about his profession. Could it be that he was a thief? A slaver? A beggar? She nearly laughed aloud at the last choice. No beggar carried himself with such a regal air.

"Is there a problem with the question?" she asked, not wanting to sound nosy, but thinking he owed her at least that much information, considering they were dream lovers. Unless he wanted to ignore the dreams. If so, it was possible for their bond to be broken. Just moments ago, she had been certain she didn't want to be tied down with

any man. Now looking at him, the pull between them seeming to increase with every moment, she wasn't so sure.

"No. It's a perfectly acceptable question."

She couldn't help smiling a bit. His attitude was too much even for a Horseman. "Well, thank you very much. How about an answer?"

He glanced at her over his shoulder, his eyes narrowed. "Aggressive, aren't you? Beautiful and aggressive."

His rather backhanded compliment made her tingle a bit. It felt good, knowing he found her beautiful. At least they appealed to each other, for it seemed they clashed in every other way. What made her think dream lovers would be perfectly compatible?

"What's the secret? Unless you're a criminal of some sort."

He laughed and placed the poker aside, though he remained squatting by the fire. "I'm not a criminal. It's just that I'm not working at the moment."

Phillipa closed her eyes and murmured, "A beggar. I knew it."

"Excuse me?" He stood, a look of amusement and disbelief on his face. "I assure you, I'm not a beggar. I had a rather serious injury not long ago and have taken time off to recover."

She studied him carefully. Maybe what she had taken as signs of aging had more to do with his injury. Horsemen usually healed quickly, at least any external wounds, such as cuts and bruises. Though his body was exceptionally well proportioned, he was rather lean, every bone and muscle prominent. Much like a Carrier toward the end of Gathering season, when they often took a ridiculous number of flights to and from the Spikelands in order to store up Rock Blood through the off-season.

During the winter months, the Spikes, fast-moving storms of unlivable temperatures, covered the northern islands. No Gathering Parties traveled there until after the Spikes stopped. For the end of season rush, the strongest Carriers were sometimes able to make two or three flights in a day, though it took a physical toll.

"Are you a racer?" she ventured. Though he was more heavily boned than most racers, he could still possess speed and stamina. Terra was probably the fastest Horseman in the world today and he was bigger than Luther.

"I'm a Carrier."

"Really? I thought you might be. My brother is a Fighting Carrier. What village do you fly for?"

"What's your brother's name?"

"Terra."

He smiled faintly. "Ah yes. Terra. An outstanding Horseman, much like his sire."

Chapter Two

Winter Heat

"You know Terra?" Phillipa asked. "And you knew my father?"

"Yes," Luther replied and walked toward the fire.

"That's wonderful..." Her sentence trailed off and she studied him carefully. He sat in the chair and stared at the flames. "Did you and Terra get along? I know he can be a little tough, especially if he led a Gathering Party you were in."

"We got along very well. He was one of my best students. And one of my first. He enlisted the same year I became an instructor."

This stunned Phillipa so much that for a moment she didn't speak. Finally she said, "You're a Fighting Carrier?"

He nodded. "For the time being."

"What's that supposed to mean? Are you thinking about quitting? What kind of injury did you have? I hope it's nothing permanent."

"No. It's not permanent and I'd rather not talk about it."

She nodded. "I'm sorry. If we're going to pursue this dream lover issue, then I'd better tell you I'm very outspoken."

"Really?" He grinned, glancing at her. "I hadn't noticed."

Lifting an eyebrow, she folded her arms beneath her breasts and stepped closer to him. "And you look like the kind of Horseman who takes about ten years to get to know. Are you always this uptight?"

"I am not uptight."

"I feel like I'm talking to royalty or something. You're nothing like the Fighting Carriers I've known."

"I'm sorry," he said, sounding rather sarcastic. "How does your average run-of-the-mill Fighting Carrier act?"

"I didn't mean to offend you and there's no such thing as a run of the mill Fighting Carrier. You're the greatest warriors and the best fliers in the world."

"Yes, we're gods," he said with bitterness that took her aback.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm sorry." This time he sounded sincere.

"You can't be too much older than Terra. How did you end up instructing him?"

"I was one of the youngest instructors ever assigned," he said without a hint of the pride she would have expected to accompany such a boast.

Obviously, he didn't want to discuss his career. She had no idea what sort of injury he'd sustained. Sometimes Horsemen, especially ones with grueling schedules like Fighting Carriers, suffered debilitating lung injuries from which they never regained their health. A few years back Terra had such an injury, but fortunately he had fully recovered. Maybe Luther hadn't been so lucky. It would certainly explain his reluctance to talk about his career.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Lie down and I'll bring you something to eat. You should rest."

"I'm sure I'm all right," she said, but walked back to bed. Though she doubted she'd been seriously hurt in the fall, she still felt sore and tired. Food and sleep sounded very good at the moment, even though it would be hard to relax when she was more curious than ever about Luther.

After eating, Phillipa wanted to help Luther with the dishes, but he insisted she rest.

"I'm taking your bed," she said, feeling sleepier than she wanted to admit.

"Not a problem. The weather should be clear by morning and as long as you feel up to it, I can fly you back to Hornview."

Her heart fluttered at the thought of sitting astride him. She'd only seen his equine-half in her dream and could hardly wait to view it in the flesh. Even in Huform, he was outstanding. His back was to her as he washed the dishes in a basin and rinsed them in another, so she took the opportunity to stare at him.

He'd bound his long, silky hair in a tail that hung down his back. The play of muscles in his shoulders and back beneath his linen shirt prompted images of her stroking and kissing every inch of him. She let her gaze linger on the curves of his firm backside and legs, the lean muscles pressing against his black trousers.

"What about my horse? I can't leave him."

"I'll bring him to you."

"I'll be able to ride by tomorrow."

He narrowed his eyes, a slight smile tugging at his lips. "We'll discuss it in the morning."

Though she knew he meant to be kind, his comment irritated her. She hated being told what to do.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Apparently he was perceptive as well. If they did venture into a relationship because of their dream sharing, she guessed he would be difficult for many reasons, his keen observation and a tendency for bossiness being among them. At least his handsome looks would be some compensation. The thought of bedding him made her belly clench with desire.

In spite of her attraction to him, she was tired from her accident and by the time he'd finished with the dishes, she was nearly asleep. Still, she watched through half-open eyes as he walked to the chair by the fireplace and sat, a book in his hand. She wanted to ask what he was reading, but at the moment talking seemed like too much of an effort. Seconds later, she fell asleep.

* * * * *

Phillipa knelt on the floor near Luther's chair by the hearth. Her cheek rested against his knee and she felt the gentle stroking of his hand on her hair. Embers glowed in the fireplace, yet there was no chill in the air. The room felt rather warm and Luther's scent, an alluring mixture of fresh herbs and raw male, filled her every breath. She knew she was dreaming and, by the intensity of the experience, it was another magical dream, one shared by a Horseman and his mate.

Her pulse raced and her entire body tingled with overwhelming desire for Luther. She sat up and lifted her gaze to his. Gods, the temperature in the room seemed to rise so high that it felt like summer in the tropics. Topaz blue eyes stared at her with such passion that she grew wet just from his look alone.

"The gods are definitely trying to tell us something," he said in a husky voice that sent a ripple of desire down her spine. "Now is our chance, Phillipa. Do we act on our dreams or deny them?"

"Deny them? The thought hadn't even entered my mind," she murmured, her hand sliding along his inner thigh. A thrill darted through her when she realized he was naked. They both were. It had happened quickly, seamlessly, just like one would expect in a dream.

"Good." He pulled her into his arms and carried her to the bed.

Phillipa clung to his neck, her face buried in his hair. It smelled wonderful and felt even better, like silk against her skin. He placed her on the bed and stretched out beside her, his body half draped over hers. The sensation of his warm flesh roughened by hair in all the right places was so wonderful, Phillipa couldn't seem to get close enough to him.

She closed her eyes and tightened her arms around him. Her palms ran over as much of him as she could reach, stroking him from back to buttocks. Muscles rippled beneath his flesh. His heavily muscled leg covered hers, making it difficult to move, yet she managed to wriggle even closer to him.

His lips trailed along her shoulder and neck while he cupped her face in his hand, using his thumb to tenderly stroke her cheek and jaw.

"Gods, Phillipa, I want you."

"So do I," she breathed. "I mean, I want you. I don't want me. I want —"

He silenced her with a kiss so deep it nearly stole her breath. Completely lost in sensation, she held him tightly, relishing every thrust of his warm, wet tongue. Hers met it, following his rhythm as if they'd always been together.

Maybe it was the dream sharing, but though he was fresh and new to her, someone she wanted to explore, there was something familiar about him. One thing was certain, they belonged together, at least when it came to lovemaking. Never in her life had Phillipa been so attracted to a man. Not only did she find him incredibly handsome, but his manner—reserved yet confident, hospitable yet arrogant—aroused her. He stirred her temper and her lust at the same time. The combination was intoxicating.

The way he devoured her with deep kisses suggested she intrigued him as much as he intrigued her. Just when she thought she couldn't bear the anticipation any longer, he covered her body completely with his and entered her slick pussy with a long, slow thrust.

"Oh yes!" she gasped and wrapped her arms and legs around him.

"Phillipa, ah gods," he panted close to her ear.

It might have been the magic of the dream, but the tension between them was unbearable. She needed him so badly it was almost painful and by the way his powerful body trembled against hers with every frustratingly slow thrust, she knew he felt the same.

"Please, Luther, just...please. Faster! I can't stand it!"

He grunted in reply and began thrusting in earnest. His muscles tightened and his hips churned. The wonderful friction was so intense that Phillipa could no longer form words. She simply groaned and gasped. For several seconds her thrusting hips tried to match his rhythm, but he was too quick. Instead she locked her legs around him and held on for a wild ride.

"Phillipa. Phillipa," he panted. The tip of his tongue circled her ear, then he kissed her again.

She felt his body grow hotter, so much that a light sweat broke out on her flesh. A Horseman's body temperature was naturally far higher than a human's, even higher than Phillipa's, who had Horseman blood in her veins. She loved Luther's heat and she loved the way his long, thick cock filled her so completely and rubbed her where she most wanted to be touched. If he could keep up that frantic pace for a little longer, she was just about to...

"Oh Luther!" she cried, clinging to him so hard that every muscle in her body burned, yet she didn't care. Three more fierce thrusts and he pushed her over the edge. Her pussy convulsed around his cock and wave after wave of intense pleasure broke over her straining body.

* * * * *

Phillipa awoke abruptly, her heart pounding and pussy still throbbing in the aftermath of pleasure. Her entire body felt flushed with combined passion and embarrassment when she glanced across the room and found Luther staring at her from where he still sat in his chair by the hearth. In spite of his seemingly relaxed position, he looked anything but calm.

His elfin eyes practically glowed with lust and the tips of his pointed Horseman ears were pinned tightly to his head, revealing his intense emotion. Beneath his white linen shirt, his chest rose and fell, proving the dream affected him as well.

Without saying a word, he rose and approached the bed. Phillipa trembled with anticipation as he stared at her. He reached out and gently caressed her cheek with his hand. Phillipa resisted the urge to close her eyes, but allowed herself to press her face closer to his palm. The faintest smile touched his lips and he said, "Care to finish what we started in that dream?"

Though her pulse beat wildly in her throat, Phillipa knew she couldn't refuse him. She still wanted him so badly it was almost painful and by the look of the bulge in his breeches, it would be cruel to turn him away. More than anything, she wanted his naked body against hers. She wanted to know how it felt to really be with Luther without the dreamlike haze around them.

"Yes," she said and moistened her lips, which had gone as dry as her pussy was wet. The thought of him filling her with his cock had her trembling with need.

"Good." In a swift motion, he pulled off his shirt and tossed it aside. The sight of his chest made her mouth go dry. She moistened her lips as her gaze traveled over the powerful expanse then dropped to the lean waist and chiseled stomach muscles. Gods he was the most virile creature she'd ever seen.

Phillipa watched with anticipation as he removed his breeches, revealing long, sinewy legs lightly covered with golden hair. She couldn't look long because he climbed beneath the covers, wrapped an arm around her waist and tugged her close to him. Since they were of similar height, their bodies seemed to align perfectly.

Heavens, he felt even better than in the dream. His flesh was quite warm, as one would expect in a Horseman, and his muscles, though not overly large, were hard as steel. She didn't doubt his rock-hardness resulted from many years as a Fighting Carrier.

"Gods, you're beautiful," he murmured, gazing into her eyes. His fingertips lightly caressed her cheek, as if he couldn't quite believe she was in his arms. Then he trailed his lips along the side of her face, a gentle caress from temple to jawline.

Phillipa moaned softly. Her eyes slipped shut and she tilted her head to the side, giving him easier access to her neck. He took complete advantage and began licking and kissing her neck and shoulder. A sexy, guttural sound escaped his throat and sent a quiver of passion down her spine.

When the tip of his tongue began circling her ear, she gasped and trembled, her nipples tightening as pleasure grew. He'd licked her ear in the dream, but it felt so

much better in reality. His hot, wet tongue tickled and teased her, then he gently nibbled her earlobe before thrusting his tongue partway into her ear.

"Umm," she purred. Her toes curled and she snuggled even closer to him. "That tickles."

He laughed softly, a low rumble in his chest. "I love your scent, Phillipa, and the way you feel. So soft."

"Me?" she giggled. "No one has ever described any part of me as soft."

"You are. Smooth. Warm. I feel like I could touch you forever and never grow tired of it." He lifted his head from her shoulder and she opened her eyes to meet his gaze. The sensations tugging at her heart nearly overwhelmed her. Phillipa had always been a free spirit, relishing the rare power she wielded as a female messenger in a world dominated by men. Here with Luther, she felt a sense of belonging such as she'd never known.

He made her feel lovely, protected and feminine in a way she'd never before experienced. Somewhere in the back of her mind she rebelled against this kind of surrender, yet the drives of her body and a longing she never realized she'd had kept her in his arms. Always decisive, Phillipa had learned to pursue her desires and she desperately wanted Luther.

His mouth covered hers in a deep, yet tender, kiss. Closing her eyes, she clung to his neck and slid her leg between his while enjoying the gentle stroking of his tongue against hers. She threaded her fingers through his long hair, loving its satiny texture sliding between her fingers. It carried the smoky scent of the fire, yet also had the underlying crisp aroma of a forest in winter. When the kiss broke, she buried her face in his hair, inhaling deeply while her hands stroked his back.

"I love how you smell too," she said. "Especially your hair."

He chuckled. "I'll take that as a good thing."

"A very good thing." She nibbled his ear and swirled her tongue around it, as he'd done to hers. It twitched, the tip flickering forward. Horsemen had the most adorable ears. She'd always wished she'd inherited those ears from her father's bloodline, but like most daughters of Horsemen, she looked completely human.

Only very old, closely bred families seemed to produce women with any sort of distinctive Horsemen features. There were few such families left. To Phillipa's knowledge, they were wealthy and snobbish. Some retained titles from ages long past and dominated the few kingdoms left still governed by royalty.

"Gods, that tickles." He laughed and tugged slightly away from her, his eyes glistening with humor.

Phillipa loved his smile. It was so warm, yet at the same time devilish.

"Hmm, we know Horsemen ears are sensitive," she said, running her fingertip along the edge of his ear. She once again noted the gold hoop and sapphire stud in his

ear. For some reason, the odd adornments suited him. "But let's see if you're ticklish anywhere else."

She slid her hands down his back and her fingers fluttered over his sides. He tried to stifle himself and it worked for all of two seconds before he rolled onto his back, laughing.

Inspired by her newfound control over this handsome beast, she quickly straddled his thighs and tickled his ribs and stomach. The muscles in his flat belly tightened and jerked with laughter.

"Stop it," he chuckled.

"No!"

He grasped her wrists and dragged her atop him so that her breasts pressed against his chest. If only there wasn't the barrier of clothes between them. As if reading her mind, his smile faded and he gazed into her eyes with enough intensity to set her on fire.

He pulled the shirt up her body and she repositioned herself so that he could slide it over her head. Heat rose in her face. In spite of how much she wanted him, she wasn't very experienced with men. It felt strange lying half naked with him, yet at the same time nothing felt more right. Luther touched her heart in a way she'd never imagined possible with a man she scarcely knew.

His fingertips stroked her gently from shoulders to buttocks, the motion soothing her, though she was more aroused than ever. His hard cock pressed against her and she couldn't keep from thrusting her pelvis against his. Little ripples of pleasure rolled from her clit to her pussy and belly. Even her nipples tingled and her pulse quickened.

Then a sobering thought struck her.

"Luther, we can't do this."

"What?" He stared at her with wide eyes.

"What if there's a child? Some say that dream sharing happens to couples who are meant to breed."

He grinned. "Then let's get to it."

His grip tightened on her, but she pulled away slightly and braced her weight on her forearms so she could continue holding his gaze. The position also kept her bare breasts partially hidden against his chest.

"We can't just leap into this," she said.

"You don't want children?"

Until then she'd never thought very much about having children. The idea of having a child with Luther appealed to her more than she wanted to admit. For a brief moment she imaged how it would feel to carry Luther's baby and she desperately wanted a part of him—a part of *them*—growing inside her. This sudden change in all she'd believed about her desires was enough to make her dizzy. She needed time to think.

"Luther, we don't even know if we want each other. Outside of the bedroom, I mean."

Her words finally seemed to sink in and he nodded slowly, his expression serious. "Of course. We scarcely know each other. For all I know, you have someone else —"

"There's no one else," she said quickly. "It's just — what happens if there's a child, but we decide we don't belong together?"

"I'll take care of it."

"What about me? How am I supposed to do messenger work when I'm nine months pregnant? You might take care of the baby, but I'll have to support myself."

"I meant I'd take care of you too. It would be the least I can do."

She gave a snort of laughter. "And how do you plan to do that? You live in a shack in the woods. You have no job unless you go back to the Fighting Carriers."

He raised an eyebrow and wrinkled his nose a bit. "Phillipa, I can well afford children. Do you think I'm so irresponsible that I'd consider this arrangement if I couldn't support a family?"

Sheer terror washed over her. The idea of being bound to a man overwhelmed her.

"What's wrong?" he demanded. "You look sick. The way you were acting a few moments ago, I thought you *liked* the idea of us being together."

"I do. I just...I want to be sure. *We* want to be sure."

"I'm sure."

"But —"

"You're my soul mate. I've never felt anything like this before. Have you?"

"Of course not. I never thought this would happen to me, that's all. I'm a little..."

"Afraid?" he supplied. Once again the corners of his lips turned up in a smile. His tender, amused expression only made her angry.

She tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip on her. "Don't do that, Phillipa. Talk to me."

"You're laughing at me."

"Why would I do that? I just..."

"What?"

"I have a feeling if I tell the truth, you're going to get mad at me."

She forced herself to say in a deceptively calm voice, "No I won't."

"I just think you're cute."

Her anger flared. "Cute?"

"You *are* mad."

"I'm *not* mad."

"Then you always grind your teeth when you're happy?"

"Damn it, Luther, you are so frustrating," she snapped. Gazing into his large blue eyes, she wondered how she could be annoyed yet aroused at the same time.

He still held her close to his warm, powerful body and his thick cock felt harder than ever where it was trapped between them. The lust in his eyes hadn't faded, yet he made no motion to push himself upon her. She sensed that he would wait until she made the next move.

In spite of her good intentions, their powerful desire made denying the dream sharing impossible. Not only that, for some inexplicable reason she trusted him completely. Maybe it had to do with the dream sharing, but she knew in her heart he was a good Horseman. *Her* Horseman.

"I won't force you, Phillipa," he said, loosening his hold on her. He brushed a lock of hair from her cheek and took her face in his hands. The longing in his expression reflected the ache deep inside her. "If you want me to leave this bed, all you need do is ask."

This was one of the most difficult moments of her life. She didn't want him to leave the bed. She wanted him to make passionate love to her, but there could be too many consequences for such an impulsive action.

"I think you should go," she said, her voice just above a whisper.

The disappointment in his eyes wounded her. Already their emotions seemed to be linked, like lovers. Soul mates. When he moved from beneath her and stood, the feeling of emptiness was almost intolerable, yet she tightened her grip on the sheets and refrained from begging him to come back to bed.

He stooped and picked up her shirt from where it had been carelessly tossed on the floor. His back to her, he held out the shirt so that it hung within her reach. She sat up, took it and donned it quickly.

Seconds later, he turned, his intense gaze burning into her.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"I understand. I'd like permission to court you, Phillipa."

His formal expression took her aback. He was suddenly so different from the playful Horseman who'd lain with her moments ago. Had she already become accustomed to that brief intimacy they'd shared? Talking and laughing together, kissing and touching each other seemed right, yet this emotional distance felt wrong.

"Of course," she said.

He reached out and cupped her chin in his hand, then bent and spoke against her lips. "A warning. I plan to court you with a vengeance."

Her stomach fluttered and a giddy feeling washed over her. Before she could reply, he covered her mouth with a possessive kiss that nearly stole her breath. When it broke, she swayed toward him, but he walked back to the chair by the fire and, with a sigh, dropped into it. His gaze fixed on the smoldering flames.

Phillipa couldn't help wondering if she hadn't made a terrible mistake. Without Luther, the bed seemed rather cold and empty.

* * * * *

The following morning, Phillipa awoke to find Luther gone, though he'd left a bath filled with warm water and breakfast on the table. She undressed and sank into the tub. As she washed, she looked toward the door, part of her hoping he'd step through while she sat wet, naked and longing for his touch. When had she turned into such a wanton tease?

Since meeting Luther, she'd experienced womanly feelings she'd never imagined. In spite of her attractive looks, Phillipa had always been rather boyish. With Luther she felt anything but masculine. She wanted to melt into his arms and be devoured by his strong Horseman body.

Just thinking about making love with him had her nipples hard as pebbles and her clit aching with need. Unable to resist, she reached down and cupped her soft mound, using her palm to stimulate herself while her eyes slipped shut and her thoughts drifted toward Luther. She imagined his large, warm hand stroking her.

A little ripple of pleasure darted through her. Her other hand roamed over her breasts, kneading the soft spheres. She pinched the sensitive nipples and ran her thumb over them. Moaning, she circled her clit, then slowly slid a finger into her hot, yearning pussy. If only Luther's fingers were on her or, even better, his thick cock easing deeper and deeper inside her, filling her.

Shaking her head, she let her hands drop to her sides. Perhaps if she only felt physical attraction for him she could better handle the situation. Her powerful feelings for him concerned her, made her vulnerable in a way that affronted her very nature. She opened her eyes and sighed deeply, then stood and reached for a towel. Once she'd stepped out of the tub and stood dripping on a round rope carpet, she dried off quickly, a slight shiver darting through her, though the room wasn't really cold. Luther had lit a fire before he left and its warmth kept out the winter chill.

Phillipa dressed and wrapped the towel around her hair before she sat at the table and began eating the food he'd left for her. There was bread, honey and tea. Famished, she ate heartily, and by the time she heard hoofbeats approaching, she'd finished nearly all the bread.

The door opened and Luther, wearing his beast-half and full-coat, stepped inside. He stomped snow from his hooves and used his tail to brush icy flakes off his equine back. Once again, his beauty left her slightly breathless. She longed to run her hands over the shaggy pure white coat covering his sinewy man-torso and powerful equine-half.

In spite of the frosty wind blowing through the door, Phillipa could see streaks of sunlight through the trees outside and she guessed the storm had finally ended.

"Good morning," he said.

"Hello. The weather looks clear."

"It's a beautiful day. As good as we could hope for to fly you back to Hornview."

"Thank you, Luther, but I'll ride Black Silk."

His brow furrowed and he approached the table, his gaze upon her. "I don't recommend it. You did have a serious fall."

"I'm fine now and I don't like the idea of leaving my horse behind."

"Your mind is made up, then?"

"Yes."

"All right. I'll escort you home."

"I don't need an escort."

A smile tugged at his lips. "But don't you want one? It'll be a long, lonely ride."

Damn, the man was far too enticing for her own good.

Shaking her head, she sighed but couldn't help smiling. "You're persistent, aren't you?"

"I've been told it's one of my virtues and I'd feel much better knowing you reached Hornview safely."

The idea of traveling with Luther appealed to her. In truth, she hated the thought of leaving him and was glad he intended to pursue her as he'd promised the night before.

"You can escort me on one condition."

"What condition is that?"

"That you stay in Hornview for the Unity Feast."

Her suggestion took Luther aback. He had planned to spend the holiday sulking alone in his cabin. He deserved to. After all, the members of his last Gathering Party didn't have the chance to spend the holiday or any other day with their friends and families.

"Well?" she demanded.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea."

She cocked an eyebrow. "So much for courting me with a vengeance."

"It's not that," he said. "I just...I don't feel much like celebrating this year."

"I see." She lowered her gaze but not before he noticed the uncertain look in her eyes.

His refusal apparently upset her and that hadn't been his intention. She'd suggested they take their relationship slowly so he assumed she was still unsure about accepting their dream sharing. Now he realized she wanted him to pursue her though something prevented her from acting rashly when it came to their dream sharing. Perhaps that was good, since at least one of them should remain sensible about it.

Just looking at her was enough to send Luther's desire into overdrive. He didn't deserve to feel this much passion, so maybe her hesitance served to remind him that he wasn't worthy of the gift of a dream lover. Regardless he needed to let her know that his reason for not accepting her invitation had nothing to do with his desire to spend time with her.

"I'm not sure I'd be very good company," he explained.

Smiling slightly, she stood and placed her hands on his chest. Now that he wore his beast-half, he was much taller than her, so she tilted her face to meet his gaze. "I can bear with it. So what about it, Luther? Isn't feasting in Hornview better than being shut up alone here?"

Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have been able to argue with her. Though he had no right to the comfort of his dream lover and the company of others for this Unity Feast, he couldn't help longing for it. He didn't want to part from her and this was the perfect opportunity to try winning her over.

"Well?" she asked.

"I'd be honored to join you." He bowed his head slightly.

Standing on tiptoe, she slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"We can leave as soon as you're ready," he said.

"I'm ready. I just want to go to the barn and prepare my horse."

"I can do it for you."

"No thanks. I don't want Black Silk to think I've forgotten about him."

He let her go without protest, knowing by the way she spoke of the animal she had a connection to him. Once she'd gone, he cleaned the breakfast dishes, filled his water pouch and hung it around his neck. Then he packed a few belongings for his trip to Hornview. Some, such as a change of clothes and cloak specially made for his equine-half, he would store in his saddle bag.

Several small, but necessary, items he placed in a light pouch around his neck. Finally he killed the fire and glanced around the cabin, making certain all would be well during his absence. After locking the cabin door, he joined Phillipa in the barn where she had just finished brushing the black stallion.

Her gaze drifted to Luther and she smiled. She had the prettiest smile. Like a lovesick colt, he felt as if he could gaze at it forever. Returning the gesture, he walked to a trunk where he kept his grooming supplies. While he picked up several items to take with him, she approached.

"Goodness, where did you get these?" she asked, reaching for a brush with a pure silver back decorated with an intricate pattern of acorns and leaves. After admiring the brush, she handed it to him, then picked up a stone pick with a polished silver handle. "These things must have cost a fortune."

"They were a gift."

She glanced at him in surprise. "Must be from a rich friend."

Without further comment, he took the pick from her and placed it in his saddle bag. Then he dropped a light riding saddle on his back.

"Would you like me to tighten the girth for you?" she asked.

"Thank you."

Chapter Three

A Story to Tell

Phillipa approached and placed a hand on Luther's saddle. She noted it was light for pleasure riding or competition rather than the larger saddles working Carriers used on Gatherings. Though obviously worn, it was very well made and of the highest quality materials. She knew that, like the grooming supplies, it was quite expensive.

Fighting Carriers were neither poor nor wealthy. Because their organization dedicated itself to the welfare of humans and Horsemen, members rarely earned payment comparable to their efforts—at least in Phillipa's opinion. If Luther was rich, it certainly wasn't due to his career.

He couldn't be rich. Why would a wealthy Horseman live in a one-room cabin in the middle of nowhere?

As she tightened his girth, her thoughts drifted from his financial situation. Her entire body tingled and the urge to stroke his equine belly almost overcame her. It was bad manners to touch a Horseman in that way without permission. Not that she thought he'd mind, considering they were dream lovers, but it never hurt to be polite.

"Luther, may I touch you?"

He glanced at her over his shoulder, devouring her with his eyes. "You don't have to ask."

Moistening her lips that had suddenly gone dry, she reached out a tentative hand and placed it on his equine belly. His thick winter coat felt rough against her palm and, like all Horsemen, his body was incredibly warm. Slowly, she ran her hand along his belly and over his powerful beast-shoulder. The hard muscles rippled beneath her palm.

Her fingertips traveled along the joining of his wing. Both appendages were folded to his sides in a relaxed position. She longed to see how they looked fully spread in flight. Stroking the feathers, she relished their softness. She leaned closer and brushed her cheek over them. Her eyes closed, she took several moments to enjoy the sensation of those feathers against her skin before once again opening her eyes and continuing her exploration.

There was nothing more beautiful or majestic than a Horseman, in particular *this* Horseman. How would it feel to sit astride him with no saddle, her legs wrapped around him and her arms clinging tightly to his gorgeous man-torso? The thought of it made her legs weak and heat flood her pussy. A ripple of pleasure darted through her and she continued stroking him as she stepped in front of him.

She fixed her gaze on her hands, which now rested on his man's waist. Slowly she moved her palms over his stomach and up his chest covered in the heavy full-coat. His hands, also protected by white hair, closed over hers, pressing them so hard to his chest that she felt the rhythmic beating of his powerful Horseman heart.

"Phillipa," he said, his chest vibrating beneath her palms.

She looked up at him, her pulse racing, and hoped the lustful look in his eyes meant he was about to kiss her.

He bent, his lips almost touching hers, and said, "Do you mind a full-coat?"

"Of course not," she said, her heartbeat quickening with anticipation.

Still holding her hands to his chest, he kissed her. Though his lips were warm and soft, the hair surrounding them tickled her most pleasantly. He cupped the back of her head and gently tugged her a bit closer. She rose higher onto her toes in an attempt to reach him better.

His lips still pressed to hers, he grasped her buttocks and lifted her.

"Ah! Luther!" She laughed and wrapped her legs around his man's waist. Her feet rested against his equine back and she clung to his neck, though his arms offered her solid support.

Silencing her with another kiss, this one even deeper than before, he thrust his tongue into her mouth. She met each warm, delicious stroke. Her clit tingled and her pussy dampened. Instinctively, she thrust her pelvis against him in an attempt to satisfy the wonderful ache inspired by his touch and kiss.

A low groan escaped his throat and his kiss became even more possessive. His grip on her tightened. When the kiss finally broke, Phillipa gasped and even Luther was slightly breathless. His eyes glistened with desire and he gently bit her lower lip.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured. "I know it sounds like a trite compliment, but it's true. Your eyes look like a tropical sea and your lips are so luscious, I never want to stop kissing them."

Phillipa smiled. "Trite? Not to me."

How many women wouldn't want a handsome Horseman feeding her compliments like apples?

He grinned and brushed his nose against hers. "Ride me back to Hornview instead of your horse."

"Well, he could use the rest," she said. The very thought of riding Luther made her weak with desire. Riding him would be exquisite torture, because all she'd be able to think about was making love with him. Gods, how was she going to follow her own advice and take things slowly when more than anything she wanted him to claim her body and sate the lust burning between them?

"Good. Then mount up."

Reluctantly, she dropped her legs from him. Before he released her from his embrace, he kissed her again, then brushed his lips across her eyelids. They gazed into

each other's eyes and at that moment Phillipa knew he would always be part of her. Though she'd just met him, he had already secured a place in her future. Oh she'd play along for a while and let him "court her with a vengeance", but she finally understood the power of the bond between dream lovers. The more time they spent together the stronger that bond became.

"I can't believe this happened to us," she said, her voice just above a whisper.

"Neither can I. After all this time, I never would have imagined —"

"I thought I was immune."

A slight smile touched his lips. He shook his head and brushed away a strand of hair that clung to the corner of her mouth then he kissed her again.

She sighed. "I suppose we should be going before another storm hits, then we'll really be stuck here."

A playful gleam in his eyes, he said, "Would that be so bad?"

"It would be far too tempting. I doubt I could keep my hands off you if we stayed here another night."

He tilted his head to one side, strolled to the barn door and glanced out. "Lord, it looks bad out there. Sorry, Phillipa, don't think we can make it to Hornview."

Wrinkling her nose, she approached and gently slapped his equine rump. "You liar."

He shrugged. "Can't blame a Horseman for trying."

While she saddled Black Silk, Luther donned a leather harness that fit over his shoulders and chest with two handles in back for a rider to hold. She could scarcely wait to get on his back. It would be even better if there was no saddle between them, or clothes for that matter. A quiver of pure pleasure darted through her when she thought about how it would feel to ride him bareback.

She turned and handed him Black Silk's reins. His eyes burned into hers and for a moment she wondered if he'd been sharing her bareback fantasy. With all her talk about taking things slowly, all she could think about was getting closer to him. Bareback. Making love. It was as if they were under a spell. Weren't they? Wasn't dream sharing magical, after all?

"Keep looking at me like that, Phillipa, and we'll never get out of this barn," he said in a husky voice that made her belly clench and her nipples tingle.

She stepped closer to him and trailed her hand over his equine shoulder. His coat was white as the snow outside. His pale gold human hair tumbled down his broad back like a true-horse's mane. He was so powerful and almost mystical in his sleek white beauty.

Drawing a deep breath, she grasped the pommel, placed her foot in the stirrup and swung onto his back. Good thing she was so tall, otherwise she would have had trouble mounting without stepping on something first.

"I put on the harness for your convenience," he said, glancing over his shoulder at her. "Feel free to hold me instead."

A tingle of lust shot through her at the thought of clinging to him, resting her cheek against his back and listening to the rhythm of his powerful Horseman heart.

Still she forced herself to say in a teasing voice, "You must say that to all the girls."

He gave a snort of laughter. "I'm not that kind of Horseman."

"Uh huh."

"Don't believe me?"

"We'll see," she replied. How could a creature this gorgeous not be a flirt?

He strode out of the barn and she couldn't help noticing how smoothly he moved. She couldn't wait for a pleasure ride without the need to guide Black Silk so that she could really feel Luther's paces on land and in the air.

Though she loved true-horses, nothing felt quite like riding a Horseman, especially one like Luther. He was so perfectly proportioned and with every step she felt the ripple of his lean muscles. His power seemed to flow into her. In spite of his sturdy build, she had the feeling he possessed much speed. Speed, strength and stamina were three main qualifications for Fighting Carriers.

Soon, they were walking happily through the woods. He asked about her work as a messenger, her family and friends. Luther was so skilled at keeping the conversation focused on her that they were almost to Hornview when she realized she'd scarcely gotten the chance to ask him any of the things she wanted to know about him.

"You'll be visiting Terra and his wife for how long?"

"For at least another week. Luther, would you stop asking me questions for a minute?"

"Sorry. I tend to talk too much at times, especially during long walks like this. If we were in the sky –"

"I want to talk to you, but there are some things I'd like to ask."

"Of course."

"Where are you from?"

"We just came from my house."

"I mean, where did you grow up." What was wrong with him? She knew he wasn't stupid and he was *very* perceptive, so why was he being evasive?

"About two-hundred miles south of Hornview, in a place called Lawton Orchards."

Her brow furrowed. "That's one of the first settlements founded in these parts. It's still run by a royal family."

"Yes. The Woodfield-Shires."

"I've never been there, but I hear it's beautiful. Their apples are world-famous."

"The best, but you might call me biased."

They fell silent for a few moments and Phillipa thought about what he'd told her. She remembered his expensive brushes and tack. Lawton Orchards. The Woodfield-Shires. She tensed a bit. Surely he couldn't be one of *them*? Horsemen of royal blood didn't become *Fighting Carriers*. At least, not anymore. History was filled with great military Horsemen from old and respected bloodlines, but over the years members of those bloodlines had become nothing more than purist snobs.

"If you grew up at Lawton Orchards, you must know the Woodfield-Shires," she ventured.

"Rather well. I'm one of them."

Her entire body stiffened. She tried to force herself to relax, knowing he would sense any changes in her. Like true-horses, Horsemen were in tune with their riders.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Surprised to find someone from one of the first families of the North living in a shack in the woods?"

She chuckled. "You might say that. I'm even more surprised to find a Woodfield-Shire in the *Fighting Carriers*."

"You're not the only one. My family wasn't exactly tossing confetti when I joined up."

"Why did you?"

"Because I wanted to do something worthwhile with my life and I wanted something more exciting than sitting back and inheriting the family fortune."

Her lip curled. "Are you insane?"

"Someday you're going to meet my family and you'll see exactly what I mean. All they care about are social functions and who's going to win next season's Classics Competition."

Maybe because she'd never been rich, but she couldn't fathom someone giving up all that wealth to work his tail off in one of the most difficult professions in the world. Or perhaps she could. She knew how dedicated her father had been to the *Fighting Carriers* and how dedicated Terra was. Perhaps the drive to become a *Fighting Carrier* was in a Horseman's heart and couldn't be denied, no matter what his bloodline and social status.

"Your family must be proud of you. It's an honor to become a *Fighting Carrier*."

"Yes. It is." He sounded almost sad. "But clearly you're not familiar with the attitude of the Woodfield-Shires or any other royal family."

"Excuse me if I'm from common stock," she said sarcastically. "But I don't think it's anything to be ashamed of. Nor do most people anymore."

"Nor do I." He glanced at her over his shoulder. "I said you're not familiar with *their* attitude, which is nothing like mine."

"And what is their attitude?"

"Do we have to talk about this? I've spent the past eighteen years trying to forget about their attitude."

"Then why are you thinking about leaving the Fighting Carriers?"

He became uncharacteristically quiet and she almost regretted asking the question. Just as he could sense her feelings, she sensed his as well. There was a tenseness in his muscles that hadn't been there before. His ears swept back and his head bowed slightly.

"I thought we weren't going to talk about that?" he said.

Sighing, she reached up and ran her gloved hands through his hair. She played with the long pale locks, loving how the strands caught the sunlight. "What are you willing to talk about, Luther? I've answered all your questions about me, but with you everything is a deep dark secret."

"You're right. I'm not being fair. The truth about my family is they think Fighting Carriers are beneath them."

She curled her lip. "The Fighting Carriers are the oldest and most respected profession in the world. All the old families served at one time or other in the past."

"I know. It's a tradition I believe they should continue. My family expected me to oversee Lawton Orchards. I was to take over the family after my father died. My brother has inherited that happy duty now and I'm sure he's enjoying every moment of it. At least, that's what I've heard."

"When was the last time you were home?"

"It's been almost a year. That visit was probably my last, as I don't believe I'm very welcome there anymore."

"Your whole family has disowned you?"

"Not exactly *disowned*. My sister understands my decision, or at least she respects it. The others... Actually I couldn't care less what the others think anymore."

"I did say I wouldn't ask about this, but —"

"Now you want to know about the Fighting Carriers."

"I am a bit curious. If they mean so much to you that you're willing to cause a rift with your family, why would you leave?"

"Because I hold them in the highest regard. I'm not sure I'm able to properly serve them any longer."

She rested her hands lightly on his shoulders, not sure if she should continue this line of questioning, but for the first time she was actually starting to know this man's heart. So far, she liked what she saw. "Does your decision have something to do with the accident on your last flight?"

"Yes, it does," he said softly. "I don't want to discuss this any further. It's not that I don't want to answer your questions, but it's too difficult right now."

"I understand." In truth, she did understand. His accident hadn't been very long ago and she knew an emotional event such as that could take time to overcome. She'd lost enough people she loved and suffered enough disappointments to know.

He reached up and placed his hand over hers. Even through her glove, his warmth melted into her. The heat of his Horseman body actually kept her quite warm and comfortable in spite of the day's chill.

"I hope they haven't been too worried about me," she said. "And I hope my nephew hasn't been too rambunctious for Susana. He's a good little boy, but highly energetic."

Luther chuckled. "Like most young Horsemen. I'd heard through some of the other Fighting Carriers that Terra had a son. It will be interesting to see if he inherits his father's speed."

"He'll be lucky if he does. Terra's just about the fastest thing with two wings."

"If not *the* fastest. He was always great to fly with. Really kept the rest of us on our toes, so to speak."

"I'm sure he'll be happy to see you. He and Inez are due back any day."

Phillipa resumed stroking his silky hair. She gently caressed one of his pointed ears and ran her fingers over his gold hoop and sapphire stud. "I like these earrings."

"So do I. I got them my first time working in the tropics after I passed the test and became a Fighting Carrier. Trainees aren't allowed to wear anything that isn't regulation, but we get more freedom once we graduate."

She smiled. "Rebellious, aren't you?"

"To the last."

In the distance, the snow-covered rooftops of the homes and businesses in Hornview's town square came into view. Smoke drifted from the chimneys of the brick and wood buildings. Nothing was more beautiful than a northern village in wintertime.

As they neared the square, they noticed several people standing around the well in the center of town. People and true-horses mingled in front of the shops and traveled down the pathways now packed with dirty snow flattened by wagon wheels, hoof and shoe prints.

Several people called to Phillipa and waved. She noted that just about everyone they passed stared at Luther with interest. Women in particular seemed unable to tear their gazes from the magnificent white Horseman. A group of young ladies appeared especially smitten as they whispered amongst themselves, blushed and nodded in Luther's direction. The unaccustomed feeling of jealousy coiled inside her. She liked sitting astride such a beautiful Horseman, yet at the same time she hoped he wasn't the straying sort. Most Horsemen, particularly the handsome ones, had no shortage of women herding around them and some just couldn't resist females.

Relief washed over her when she noted he scarcely seemed aware of the attention and strolled regally down the path toward Susana's house.

The Chieftain's longhouse, which was the center of village life, stood to their left. A red-haired woman carrying a baby girl hurried out the door and shouted, "Phillipa! Thank the gods you're safe."

"Sophia." Phillipa waved.

A bit breathless, the woman stopped running when she reached them. "Many people are out looking for you. What happened? Who's this?"

"This is Luther. Luther, meet Sophia and her daughter, Twilight."

He and Sophia exchanged brief greetings before Phillipa continued, "I had an accident while on my way home from delivering an emergency message. I was knocked unconscious and Luther saved me from freezing to death. Who's out looking for me?"

"Zach, Moor, Terra, Inez and several men from the village. Terra, Inez and Moor returned from the tropics yesterday afternoon. When Susana told them you hadn't returned, they started searching immediately. Zach and I were visiting my parents, but when Moor flew in to see if you might have stopped by their village, we decided Zach should join the search. I'm so glad to see you're all right! We'd better tell Susana."

"Someone should try to get word to the search parties that I'm all right," Phillipa said.

"I'll do it," Luther offered. "I'm looking forward to a flight after walking all morning."

"Thank you," Phillipa said. "I'll come with you."

"I think you should stay here and rest."

"I told you I'm fine."

"I'll be flying fast to catch your friends and you did have a head injury. I wouldn't want you getting dizzy in midair."

"He's right, Phillipa," Sophia said. "And you should ask Susana to examine you as well."

"I'm sure there will be no stopping her once she finds out what happened."

Sophia laughed. "That's Susana, all right. Come on. I'll walk over with you."

Phillipa dismounted, resisting the urge to sigh with regret for being off Luther's back.

Before giving her Black Silk's reins, he took her hand in his and squeezed gently.

"Be careful," she said. "Storms can come up quickly in this season."

Goodness she was already starting to sound like a wife, yet he roused her protective instincts in spite of how he looked powerful enough to single-handedly fight a herd of Ice Lizards.

"I know. I'll be back as soon as possible." He brushed her mouth with a chaste, yet loving, kiss that warmed her in spite of the winter chill.

He opened a small pouch around his neck and poured a powdery substance into his hand. Then he swallowed it with a drink from his water pouch.

"What's that?" Phillipa asked warily.

"Crushed pond seed," he replied, and when she raised an eyebrow, he laughed and added, "Don't look at me like I'm some sort of herb addict."

Herbal addictions weren't exactly uncommon among Horsemen, especially ones involved in physically demanding careers. Racers in particular were guilty of herbal abuse. Of course, such non-medicinal use of herbs was illegal. Any Fighting Carrier caught using them without a healer's approval was severely punished and discharged from the organization.

"I didn't say that," Phillipa told him. "Out of curiosity, what's it for?"

"Pond seed promotes sweating. Like most of my bloodline, I can't sweat naturally."

Phillipa had heard of such diseases among true-horses as well as Horsemen, though it was even less common among the latter. If a Horseman who was unable to sweat did any kind of work, such as flying or galloping, he could die.

"That must be hard to live with," she said.

He winked. "Not as long as I take the pond seed. Unfortunately, it hasn't been working quite as well lately. I've probably built up a tolerance from using it for so many years. That happened to me about ten years ago when I was using a different herb, so a healer from the Fighting Carriers switched me to pond seed. Hopefully, I'll be able to find something else soon."

"You should talk to Susana about it. She's an excellent healer. I can mention it to her as soon as I see her."

"Thanks. It can't hurt." He touched a hand to his brow that was damp with sweat. "Good. Still works. I'll be back as soon as I can. Ladies." He nodded to Phillipa and Sophia, then headed toward the Running Way located outside the village square. The Running Way was a special clearing where Horsemen could take off and land safely within the confines of the village.

Once far enough from the populated area, he broke into a canter. Phillipa couldn't help taking a moment to admire him. He moved beautifully, flowing yet powerful like an equine dancer. The Running Way was completely clear, so as soon as he reached it, he switched to a gallop, his speed almost blinding. His golden hair and tail streamed in the winter wind and his alabaster wings spread, then beat hard as he rose into the air.

"That's quite an interesting Horseman," Sophia commented.

"Yes. Interesting," Phillipa murmured. When Luther disappeared behind a cover of clouds, she turned to Sophia and noticed her friend watching her with a knowing look in her eyes.

"So, tell me all about him, Phillipa."

"On the way to the barn. I want to get Black Silk settled, then find Susana."

"I'll let her know you're safe and meet you back at her house. That way you can tell us both about Luther, because I'm sure she'll want the details too."

"What details?"

Sophia raised an eyebrow and shifted her daughter to her other hip. "You don't ride in on a Horseman like that, have him kiss you and *not* have a story to tell."

Phillipa couldn't argue with that logic. She only hoped everyone who was kind enough to search for her returned safe and well. And she could scarcely wait for Luther to get back so she could continue getting to know her dream lover.

* * * * *

Several hours later, Phillipa sat in Susana's house in front of a blazing fire. Sophia sat beside her while Susana set the table for a midday meal. On the floor, Canyon played with Susana's and Sophia's daughters, Jill and Twilight. The little Horseman was admirably gentle with the younger children, though the women kept a close watch on all three.

"I hope Luther was able to find the others. Terra and Inez were so worried," Susana said. "Thank goodness Luther found you."

"I know."

"It's amazing that he just happened to be strolling through the woods at the same time you had an accident," Sophia said, a knowing look in her eyes. After seeing Phillipa and Luther together, she must have some idea they were lovers. Maybe not dream lovers, but Sophia definitely suspected something.

Phillipa didn't want to blurt out her special connection to Luther without discussing it with him first. Sharing dreams was a private experience and though she longed to share the news with her friends, she needed to wait.

The door opened and in stepped a handsome, bearded Horseman covered in a rich brown full-coat damp with sweat.

"Moor, watch your muddy hooves," Susana scolded. "I just cleaned the floor this morning."

He grinned. "Such a warm welcome, wife. That's what I get for stopping by to let you know we're all back before I go for a cool down."

"I'm sorry." Susana approached, grasped his bearded chin and tugged until he bent to accept her kiss. Then she playfully slapped his equine shoulder. "Now get your dirty hooves out of here."

"I'm going. I'm going. Phillipa." He glanced in her direction. "Glad you're home and well."

"Thanks, Moor. I'm sorry for the trouble I put you all through."

"No trouble. We needed the exercise."

"I'm sure, after several days of flying Gatherings in the tropics," she said sarcastically. Most Horsemen, especially large Carriers like Moor, hated the stifling heat in the tropics. It simply didn't blend with their naturally high body temperatures.

Moor gave a snort of laughter, then headed for the barn.

"Tell Zach, Inez and Terra to come here to eat," Susana called to him. "Oh and Luther. Can't forget him, can we?" The healer glanced at Phillipa with an amused expression.

"Actually, I think I'll take a walk to the barn and thank everybody personally," Phillipa said. She reached for her cloak and slipped it on. Though she did want to express her appreciation, the truth was she could hardly wait to see Luther again. If he'd traveled as quickly as Moor seemed to, maybe he could even use a rubdown. The thought of massaging him from head to tail filled her with desire.

"Phillipa." Susana touched her arm before she left.

"Yes?"

The healer studied her carefully. "Make sure you tell Luther I'll be glad to help him find a replacement treatment for the pond seed."

"I will. Susana, why are you looking at me like that?"

"No reason."

"No reason at all," Sophia added. "Except whenever you mention Luther, you get this gleam in your eyes."

"I admit I'm attracted to him," Phillipa said, slightly irritated over this line of questioning. She'd never been one for "girl talk" and it galled her that she'd done the one thing she'd vowed never to do—fallen in love. "Don't say it, Susana. I don't want to hear an 'I told you so'. You, Inez and Sophia have been telling me for ages that there was a man out there for me."

"You don't have to sound so upset about it," Susana said. "When it comes to romance, anyone can change her mind."

Phillipa's brow furrowed. "You know, you're right. I just get the feeling Terra will never let me live this down. All my life he's been teasing me about being a tomboy."

"You know Terra is going to be happier for you than anyone," Sophia said. "All brothers tease. Or so I've heard. I was never lucky enough to have one."

Sophia was right. Phillipa was lucky. She had a career she loved, a wonderful family, great friends and now a dream lover. What more could she possibly ask for?

Outside, she passed several men who had joined in the search for her. They walked their true-horses in front of the community barn. Several waved to her and she approached and thanked them for searching for her.

Moments later, she neared the Running Way. Her friends walked along the perimeter, cooling down after their flight. Zach, an enormous brown Highlander with shaggy white fetlocks, strolled alongside Terra, dwarfing the sleek black Fighting Carrier. Terra was considered a large Horseman, but not compared to Highlanders with their draft horse beast-halves.

Blankets covered their equine-halves and steam rose into the frigid air from their full-coated man-halves. Inez, a short but sturdy black-haired woman, strolled beside Terra's shoulder. Moor and Luther walked behind them, apparently in deep

conversation. Even among other attractive Horsemen like Terra, Zach and Moor, he stood out. Maybe it was his alabaster coat or pale gold hair. Or perhaps it was his elegant gait or the classic set of his wings, but he was breathtaking.

"Phillipa," Inez called and jogged toward her.

Phillipa picked up her pace as well and met her sister-in-law, who embraced her tightly.

"I'm so glad to see you," Inez said. "You had us worried."

"I'm sorry. It was a crazy accident. Either a tree branch or a piece of ice must have fallen and knocked me out cold."

"Good thing Luther found you," Inez said.

Together, the women walked back to the Horsemen.

"Phillipa, next time you want to meet a free Horseman, you can ask us to introduce you and not go to such extremes," Terra said, humor glistening in his eyes.

"Very funny," Phillipa said.

"Glad you're not hurt," Terra continued, squeezing her shoulder.

Phillipa glanced at Luther, whose intense gaze fixed on her. His eyes glistened with good humor and underlying passion. The man could curl her toes with a simple look. Her belly tightened with excitement just from being near him again.

"Do you know who this is?" Terra continued, jerking his thumb in Luther's direction. "He was my first instructor when I joined the Fighting Carriers."

Chapter Four

Rubdown

"I heard," Phillipa said, though she knew it was most likely too late. Like most Fighting Carriers, once Terra began talking about his beloved organization, there was no silencing him. Especially when it came to reminiscing about the old days.

"He was the toughest instructor I ever had," Terra continued. "Almost killed us. It was fantastic."

Inez raised her eyes to the heavens and Phillipa grinned.

"He held the speed record for the fastest flight to the Spikelands and back," Terra continued.

"Yes, then you broke it and no one has come close to breaking yours since," Luther chuckled.

"I surprised myself when I did that," Terra admitted. "Toward the end of that race, we were shoulder to shoulder. Never thought I'd actually beat you."

Phillipa's eyes widened in surprise. Her brother was arguably the fastest Horseman in the world. For Luther to come so close to matching his speed was impressive.

Glancing at Terra from the corner of his eye, Luther said, "Yes, you did. You didn't just want to beat me. You wanted to put both of us in the infirmary for a week and see that we never flew again."

"All this talk from this pair of speed worshippers is making me tired," Moor teased.

"Tell me about it," Zach added. "I prefer a nice, slow jog myself."

"Before or after you bust your gut pulling enough loads to kill a team of oxen?" Terra asked.

A short time ago, Zach had retired from the fair circuit as a world-famous puller. Considered a living legend, he still hosted pulling events in the North. By talking to the young Highlander, one would never guess his fame. Rather shy, he was unusually modest for a Horseman, who were often arrogant by nature.

"We'd better finish cooling down and get back to my house," Moor said. "Susana already gave the order that we're all to have the midday meal there."

"Great. I'm starving," Zach said.

The conversation drifted to mundane subjects as the Horsemen finished cooling down. Phillipa dropped back and joined Luther. As if sensing the couple's need for privacy, Moor walked ahead and joined his companions.

Luther took her hand as they strolled, her boots and his hooves trampling the dirty slush along the edge of the Running Way. His hair-covered hand felt hot and slightly

damp, yet it wasn't an unpleasant sensation. The aroma of horse, leather and sweat mingled with his alluring scent of herbs on a winter wind.

"Thank you for everything you've done," Phillipa said.

He shrugged. "You're my," pausing, he glanced toward the small group chatting in front of them. He leaned down and whispered in her ear, "do you mind if I say dream lover? I don't know how you feel about other people knowing."

She warmed inside. "I was going to ask you the same thing. I can hardly wait to tell them."

Brushing her cheek with a kiss, he squeezed her hand. "Good. How do you want to do it?"

"Let's wait until we get to Moor and Susana's. That way we only have to tell the story once. Not that I don't think Susana and Sophia haven't already guessed."

Inez and Terra glanced over their shoulders at Phillipa and Luther, then their gazes dropped to their adjoined hands. Both couples exchanged smiles before Inez and Terra once again looked away.

"I think there might be a little suspicion around here too," Luther commented softly.

"Are we being obvious?" she asked. "Because I don't want to appear lovesick. There's nothing more repulsive."

"Where's your sense of romance?"

"I've been told I don't have one."

He chuckled. "That's a lie. Your look alone is incredibly passionate."

"Is passion the same as romance?"

The expression on his face was enough to make her laugh. His brow furrowed and he turned to her. "You know, I haven't the slightest idea. What does it matter? Passion works for me."

"Do you consider a woman giving her dream lover a rubdown passionate?" Phillipa cast him what she hoped to be an inviting look. Lord, her hands itched to massage him, to feel his warm, hard body beneath her palms. She longed to soothe and pleasure him with her touch.

The inviting look must have worked because his ears twitched, his eyes darkened with lust and he tightened his grip on her hand. "I'll say it is."

"Good. When we get to the tack house, prepare yourself for the best rubdown of your life."

"Gods, don't say that." He closed his eyes momentarily, a dreamy look on his face. "Do that, and we might miss your friend's meal."

"We won't miss it, but I guarantee you'll have a great appetite when we're through."

"I thought you were going to make me court you with a vengeance?"

"You'll still have to, but that doesn't mean you can't enjoy a rubdown in the meantime."

In spite of her confident words, Phillipa wondered if he wasn't right. The idea of massaging him all over, of kissing him and pleasuring him without allowing him to fuck her was almost too much to endure. Could she possibly engage in love play without allowing him to fill her with his cock and drive her past the edge of passion?

If she did allow him to, would it be so terrible? After all, they were dream lovers, destined to mate for life. And he hadn't been lying when he said he could support a family. He was from one of the wealthiest families in the North, yet she didn't care about that.

The last thing she wanted him to think was that she desired him for his bloodline and riches. She'd desperately wanted Luther when she thought him to be a pauper living in a one-room shack in the woods. It honestly didn't matter to her whether or not he was rich, but would he believe her if she suddenly decided to make love with him after saying she thought they should wait?

Not that he necessarily had riches. He had told her he'd broken off ties with his family. Most likely he was living on a Fighting Carrier's salary. That was certainly enough to raise a family and they would have her income from her messenger service, at least until the last stages of her pregnancy. If she was lucky enough to become pregnant. It wasn't easy for a woman to get pregnant by a Horseman.

All these questions had her head spinning. She frowned. How the hell did she get herself into these situations?

"Phillipa?" Luther stroked her hair. "What's wrong? You look upset."

"No. I'm not."

"Are you sure you're up to giving me a rubdown? You did have a fall—"

"Luther, it's not the first time I've fallen off a horse. I've been riding all my life. I'm a Horseman's daughter. I'm tough. A messenger."

He paused a moment, took her in his arms and whispered in her ear, "But you're also mine." His lips caressed her ear, then brushed her forehead.

Tiny ripples of pleasure coursed through her and for a moment she leaned against him, loving the heat and hardness of his chest.

When they parted, they found the small group in front of them staring in their direction. Three Horsemen and Inez glanced away quickly, pretending not to have noticed a thing.

"I say it's definitely time to tell them the truth," Luther said.

"As soon as we get back to Susana and Moor's. And after your rubdown, of course."

"I can't wait."

Her gaze swept his chiseled man-torso and sleek beast-half. "Neither can I."

A short time later, they stood in a private stall in the tack house. Terra, Zach and Moor occupied other stalls. Phillipa closed the door for privacy, yet conversation from the others drifted through the walls. Her attention wasn't focused on their companions' discussions, but on Luther.

He'd removed his blanket and hung it over a trunk to dry. Though he'd cooled down since his flight, his body was still quite warm. Dirt streaked his legs and speckled his coat. Together they used currycombs and soft towels to clean him off. Once he was fairly clean, he closed his eyes and a quiver shot through him as his full-coat disappeared, leaving his man-torso once again covered in human skin.

Phillipa took a moment to admire his broad shoulders, powerful chest and sleek belly.

He reached for a hoof pick and cleaned his front hooves. While he did that, she brushed his equine-half. In between sweeps of the brush, she couldn't resist stroking him with her hand. His muscles rippled beneath her touch. The white coat felt coarse, but wonderful, against her palms.

She could scarcely wait to finish brushing him so she could give him a full-body massage. If only she had more time to brush his beautiful coat until it gleamed, but Susana was expecting them for the midday meal, so they couldn't linger as long as she would have liked. This grooming session was a delicious tease for them both.

"Give me the pick." She held out her hand. "I'll do your rear hooves."

He passed her the tool and lifted first one back hoof, then the other. He hadn't picked up any stones and, other than a few bits of ice, his feet were clean. She couldn't help noting the healthy sheen to his hooves and how neatly trimmed and well-shaped they were. Even this Horseman's *feet* were adorable. Gods, she had to be in love to have such crazy thoughts.

She placed the pick and brush aside. "Do you have any salve?"

He searched through his belongings that he'd removed from his saddle bag and placed on a stool in the corner of the stall. He opened a round wooden container and handed it to her. She sniffed the contents. "Umm. Coconut scent. I've never smelled one like this before."

"I got it while I was assigned to a Gathering Party in the tropics. I wouldn't recommend it for severe muscle aches, but I like the scent and it works well enough after a normal flight."

She dipped her fingers into the salve, placed a fair amount in her palm and rubbed her hands together. Starting at his equine shoulder, she began the massage. She'd groomed Horsemen in the past and, though it was an intimate duty, it had never felt this arousing. She savored every caress, every quiver of muscle, the shape of each rib and the sensation of his coat against her palms.

She rubbed the joining of his wings carefully and slowly ran her hands down each of his long legs. Touching him, it was easy to believe he possessed the speed and stamina Terra had mentioned. Though quite lean, he emanated tremendous strength.

By the time she finished massaging his beast-half, she was practically trembling with anticipation of doing his man-torso.

Taking more salve, she stepped in front of him. Her taut nipples poked against the fabric of her linen shirt, now completely visible since she'd grown warm while grooming him and removed her woolen cloak.

She glanced into his eyes and his expression told her he was as aroused as she was. No longer smiling, his handsome face tensed with desire. She placed her hands, slick with the salve, to the sides of his neck and let them rest there for a moment. His pulse beat strong against her palms and the throbbing in her pussy seemed to match it.

Though she tried to calm her racing pulse, it was impossible, not when touching him like this. With slow, deliberate strokes, she rubbed the salve into his shoulders and over his chest. Gods, he was so rock-hard. So incredibly virile. All the while, their gazes remained locked on each other. She couldn't have looked away from him even if she wanted to, so great was his hold over her.

Her hands swept over his chest. The light dusting of hair felt wonderful against her palms. She rolled her thumbs over his flat nipples, mystified by their softness since the rest of him was so very hard. Of course, there were other parts of him that would undoubtedly share that alluring combination of velvet softness and rock-hardness.

Her hands moved to his arm and she managed to tear her gaze from his so she could concentrate fully on his body. Using a fingertip, she traced the prominent vein that ran along his biceps. Other veins created a sensual pattern over his sinewy forearms. Her thumb stroked his inner wrist before she massaged his hands, gently squeezing and stroking each finger. His hands were very beautiful, yet at the same time masculine. The nails were short and clean, the fingers long and rounded.

In the midst of her hand massage, he turned the tables on her and began caressing her hand instead. He bent and kissed her neck. Tilting her head to one side, she allowed her eyes to drift shut so she could better enjoy the sensation of his hands and lips.

A shudder tore through him and for several seconds the floor shook. She knew he'd changed to his Huform. Her eyes opened and she found herself wrapped in his arms, pressed to the length of his naked body. His head rested against her shoulder as he waited for the momentary weakness that always followed shapeshifting to pass.

She wrapped her arms loosely around him so that she was free to stroke him from shoulder to buttocks. Gods, his ass was big and tight. It felt wonderful. When he began kissing her neck again, she moaned softly, realizing they must keep quiet or else the others would know what they were up to. Not that they probably hadn't guessed when she'd closed the stall door.

She doubted Terra and Inez had even noticed, since they'd closed their stall door almost as soon as they'd stepped into the tack house. She knew they'd been trying for another baby, so they were most likely as busy in their stall as she and Luther were in this one.

The thought of a baby momentarily brought her back to reality, but this time the idea of having Luther's child, or rather her *desire* to have Luther's child, didn't unsettle her as much as before. She was about to speak, but he covered her mouth in a kiss so long and deep that she soon drifted in a haze of passion.

His stiff cock pressed against her and wet heat flooded her pussy. Gods, she wanted him so badly! She squeezed his rounded ass, then gently caressed his lower back. Her hands searched for his Turning Point, the invisible yet ultra-sensitive place on a Horseman's lower back where shapeshifting initiated. Most Horsemen described the sensation of their Turning Point being caressed as akin to their cock being stroked. She knew immediately when she'd found Luther's, because he drew a sharp breath and his entire body tensed.

"Oh gods, Phillipa," he breathed against her lips. "Right there. Don't stop."

She had no intention of stopping. Exciting him aroused her more than she ever imagined possible. While she continued stroking his Turning Point, he devoured her throat with passionate kisses, using his lips and tongue on her flesh until she thought she might collapse from the pleasure. His deft fingers unfastened the ties on her shirt. He tugged it up her body and she was forced to take her hands from him, only to raise her arms overhead so he could remove her shirt.

His hot gaze fixed on her full breasts, which had tumbled free, the rosy nipples stiff as berries. Cupping the spheres, he kneaded gently and brushed his thumbs over the nipples, making her quiver with need.

"So beautiful," he murmured. Slowly he lowered himself to his knees in front of her. He paused to take one of her nipples between his lips and suck.

"Oh Luther," she gasped, somehow remembering to whisper. She clutched his head, trying to pull him closer.

He swirled his tongue over her nipple, then gently worried it with his teeth. Pure lust washed over Phillipa. She closed her eyes and staggered against the wall, scarcely able to hold herself upright.

Luther placed his hands on her hips, partially supporting her, and moved to her other breast. He sucked and licked the nipple until it was so sensitive his touch was almost painful, then he pressed soft kisses to her belly. He unbuckled her trousers and slid them down her legs. Lifting first one of her feet then the other, he discarded the trousers.

Kneeling in front of her, he covered her clit with his mouth. At the first sweep of his hot, wet tongue on the aching little nub, she nearly cried out. Panting, her heart racing out of control, she could do nothing but weave her hands through his hair and writhe as he lapped and sucked her until she thought she might faint. When the orgasm struck, she would have collapsed had he not been supporting her completely with his hands.

Pulsations still rolled through her as he slid up her body. The tip of his cock pushed against her pussy lips.

Her eyes opened partway and she found herself gazing into his intense blue ones.

"Luther."

"I want to fuck you," he whispered in her ear. "I want to claim you. My dream lover. Tell me you want the same."

"Yes," she panted. She had scarcely recovered from the first orgasm, but already longed for another.

Trembling, her heart hammering, she thrust her hips against him. A slight yet virile smile tugged at his lips before he kissed her. His tongue traced the shape of her lips, then thrust between them. He grasped her wrists and guided them above her head. Using one hand, he pinned both of hers to the wall, wrapped an arm around her waist and filled her with a long, slow thrust of his cock.

Phillipa gasped into his mouth, momentarily stunned by the discomfort of being filled by a man for the first time in her life. His eyes opened and he held her gaze.

"Gods, you're tight," he panted.

"Gods, you're huge," she murmured.

He chuckled, then his smile faded. "I haven't hurt you, have I? You really are tight."

"I'm fine." In truth, she was. The discomfort had already faded and she longed for pleasure only he could give.

Slowly, with the utmost gentleness, he began thrusting into her. She knew he was trying to be considerate, but she wanted more.

"Luther, please," she murmured, squirming against the wall. "I want...I need...Faster! Please. Harder."

With a grunt of desire, he quickly obliged. He released her hands, cupped her bottom and lunged into her so hard and fast that she nearly lost her breath. It felt absolutely wonderful.

Phillipa clung to him hard, trying to match his frenzied rhythm.

"Wrap your legs around me," he panted in a hoarse whisper as he lifted her higher. She did what he asked and locked her legs around his waist.

Gods, he was strong. She was a tall, well-muscled woman, but he supported her weight effortlessly, driving them headlong into ecstasy.

"Luther, oh yes! Oh gods," she panted, her eyes closed and neck arched. Somehow he managed to capture one of her nipples in his mouth. He sucked the sensitive bud to the same rhythm as his thrusting pelvis.

Phillipa was no longer sure if she was being quiet or not and she didn't care. Waves of orgasm broke over her, hurling her into a world where only passion existed.

In the midst of her carnal pulsations, Luther tore his mouth from her breast. Panting hard, he lunged into her. His muscles tensed as he came, his hard, hot body pinning her to the wall.

They stood, panting and sated. Her body weak, Phillipa allowed him to continue supporting her. His scent filled her and a lock of his long hair tickled her face. She

gathered enough strength to brush it away and he stirred, lifting his head and gazing at her with calm, satisfied eyes.

"I really enjoyed my rubdown," he said, a teasing smile on his lips.

She grinned. "So did I."

Someone tapped on the stall door.

"Yes?" Phillipa called, a blush rising in her cheeks. She reached for her trousers and Luther picked up her shirt for her.

"Uh, it's time to eat," Terra called, sounding a bit awkward.

"We're on our way," Luther replied.

"How am I ever going to sit down with them and eat?" Phillipa said.

"I'll have no problem. I'm starving. You know how to rouse a man's appetite in every direction." He tossed her a rather flirtatious, very masculine look and she was torn between annoyance and arousal.

"This is so embarrassing," she continued. "What were we thinking?"

"And what do you think he and Inez were doing in their stall? I never saw a Horseman slam a door shut so fast."

She sighed. "I suppose you're right. How do you think we should tell them we've shared dreams?"

"How about saying something like, 'friends, we share dreams'."

She raised her eyes to the heavens. "Oh that's original."

"All right, so we'll embellish a little. We'll say, 'friends, we share dreams and she's going to marry me as soon as I've finished courting her with a vengeance'."

She snorted. "It's a little late for that."

"Then you will marry me?" He took her hands and threaded his fingers through hers.

"I didn't say that." She tried to disentangle herself from him, but he wouldn't allow it.

"Why not?"

"We scarcely know each other."

"Then I guess we're back to courting again."

"Luther..." She held his gaze, realizing that she actually wanted to go along with his crazy idea of committing to each other right away. "Let's just go to eat."

"I'll leave out the part about marriage, but you are going to tell them we've shared dreams. I don't want you slipping away from me too easily, and preferably not at all."

"It's not that I don't want us to be together. It's just that I don't want us to make a mistake."

"You're a wise woman, Phillipa, but my senses never lie. We belong together. I'm willing to give you the time to realize it, but so there's never a question, I'm telling you right now that I want you, and I believe we belong together."

She held his gaze, unsure of what to say because, in spite of her sensible attitude, she agreed with him completely.

* * * * *

A short time later, Phillipa, Luther and the others sat around the large wooden table in Susana and Moor's home, enjoying a meal of stew and deliciously crusty bread.

"Are you back on active duty since your accident?" Terra asked Luther.

"You were in an accident?" Sophia's brow furrowed.

Oh no. Phillipa wished Terra hadn't brought the subject up. She knew it was the last thing Luther wanted to talk about.

"Yes," he replied. Though his tone was polite, he didn't offer any further information.

Thankfully, everyone had the good manners not to pry.

Luther glanced at Terra. "No, I haven't returned to duty. A little over a month ago, the healer finally let me out of the village where I'd been staying since it happened. Something about wanting to be certain the lung problem didn't recur. Bloody annoying, but he was a healer from the Fighting Carriers, so you know his word was law."

"He was right in being cautious," Susana said. "You can't be too careful with lung damage."

"Isn't that right, Terra?" Phillipa glanced at her brother.

"Absolutely," Terra agreed. "After my injury, Susana was very careful with her medical advice. And very *bossy*."

"She saved your life, didn't she?" Moor said, clearly eager to defend his spouse.

"Definitely. She's an excellent healer."

"Then I'm glad she's agreed to help me find a replacement for the pond seed," Luther said.

"That won't be a problem," Susana reassured him. "There are many alternatives."

Terra shook his head and chuckled softly.

"What?" Inez asked.

"I was just thinking about the old days. Luther, do you remember that Horseman who was a trainee at the same time I was? He was the slowest flier in the troop. He scarcely made the speed requirements."

"How could I forget him?" Luther curled his lip. "He had speed too, but wasn't one to exert himself. I tried everything to straighten him out."

"I remember the branding iron."

Sophia looked shocked. "Branding iron?"

His statement surprised Phillipa as well, though she knew by stories from Terra and her father the extremes instructors sometimes went to when molding new Fighting Carriers. "Luther, that's terrible."

"Terrible would be if he caused an accident or worse on a Gathering because of his laziness."

"Did it work?" Moor asked.

"The branding iron? No." Luther chuckled. "At least not long-term. I was about to suggest his riders start wearing spurs."

"You can't be serious?" Susana looked disgusted.

"I hope not." Moor shook his head. "Degrading and painful."

Phillipa glanced at Moor, knowing when he and Zach had been abducted by slavers, their captors hadn't hesitated to use spurs on the Horsemen who toiled in their mines.

"Of course not," Luther said.

"Why did the Fighting Carriers keep a Horseman like that?" Inez asked.

"Because he had good stamina and could carry almost as much as a Highlander. Still, that's not enough to make a Fighting Carrier. He failed the test for initiation. I wanted to toss him out a month after he arrived at the training camp. But no, they didn't listen to me," Luther said. "I actually got a reprimand because of that lazy son of a mule."

Terra's brow furrowed. "You did?"

"I was a new instructor, so anything that went wrong, I took the blame. You know how it goes."

"Oh yes." Terra sighed. For ten years he had also been an instructor at the Hall of Fighting Carriers. "I remember what that was like. Also I remember you getting plenty of flack because of your bloodline."

"What about your bloodline?" Moor asked. "The organization gave me some trouble when I became a trainee because I have some Highlander blood. They thought I was built wrong for speed and stamina."

"They were wrong." Susana glanced at her husband with pride.

"You're certainly no Highlander," Zach said to Luther with a slight smile.

He grinned. "No, I'm not."

"He's a Woodfield-Shire though," Terra said. "One of the North's first families."

The others glanced at Luther as if he was a carnival freak. Phillipa shifted uncomfortably in her chair, but Luther seemed unperturbed.

"Well." Susana smiled slightly. "Never thought we'd have royalty at our table, Moor."

"Royalty. Please." Luther snorted. "There's not just a rift between me and my family. There's a ravine."

"I can see why they gave you trouble in the Fighting Carriers, though," Moor said. "Most of them are common stock and proud of it. Your life as a trainee must have been hell."

Luther shrugged. "Respect is something everyone must earn."

"Well, you sure got respect," Terra said. "I was proud to work with you."

"And I you. If all my trainees had been like Terra, I'd be a General by now."

"We had some interesting times." Terra leaned back in his chair.

"We certainly did," Luther admitted and Phillipa didn't miss the gleam in his eyes when he spoke about the Fighting Carriers. It was like seeing another side of him. When he wasn't thinking about the accident, he exuded confidence and a zest for his organization that was almost infectious.

"Remember about eight years ago when the crops of Rock Blood in the tropics were really bad and the Fighting Carriers had to send every Horseman they could spare to scout for new harvesting grounds?" Terra asked.

Luther growled low and his eyes narrowed. "We got trapped by a massive herd of Palm Lizards and they drove us into those caves in the swamp."

Terra slapped Luther's shoulder. "We were stuck there for nearly a month before another troop found us and helped us fight our way out. We'd run out of supplies and were surviving on those berries that taste like cow shit."

"Who cares about the berries?" Luther wrinkled his nose. "We all ended up with thrush. Disgusting."

"Not to mention it hurt like hell," Terra added.

"Hurt?" Luther snorted. "I thought I was going to be lame for life."

"So did I," Terra admitted. "That swamp was so hot and filthy, we couldn't keep our feet clean, no matter what we did. We scraped muck out of our hooves until our picks busted, but once that fungus sets in—"

"Terra!" Inez snapped. "What kind of table conversation is this? Fine manners you're teaching our son. Not only that, I think you made Sophia lose her appetite."

"Sorry," Terra said. "Got a little carried away."

"I can't believe Unity Feast starts tomorrow," Susana said in an attempt to redirect the conversation.

"Will you be staying for the celebration, Luther?" Zach asked.

Luther and Phillipa exchanged glances and she said, "He better be. At least that's what he told me."

"I'm looking forward to it," Luther said. His sultry glance sent waves of passion rolling through her and she felt heat rise in her face. To conceal her emotions, she reached for another piece of bread.

"You two seem to have gotten to know each other pretty well since yesterday," Susana ventured, causing a strained silence to fall over the table. Everyone suddenly seemed very interested in their food, while at the same time glancing discreetly at Luther and Phillipa.

He looked at her, an amused gleam in his eyes.

She smiled and shook her head. "There's a reason for that. We've..." Unsure of exactly how to go on, she turned to Luther.

"We've shared dreams," he stated matter-of-factly.

Phillipa sighed. That seemed to go smoothly enough.

The others glanced at one another, smiling, before they began congratulating the new couple.

"I'm so happy for you." Inez, who sat beside Phillipa, embraced her.

"I suppose it's too early to mention a wedding date?" Sophia asked.

Chapter Five

Midnight Flight

"A bit," Phillipa said. Yes, she wanted to marry Luther, but the thought of settling down with a husband still made her rather dizzy.

"Hopefully it won't be too much longer," Luther added, casting her a poignant look.

She smiled, her nervous feelings turning to warm ones as she gazed into his elfin eyes.

"We'd better be the first to know when it happens," Terra said. "I've waited a long time to see my sister finally married off."

"That's enough out of you, you son of a mule," Phillipa said in a teasing voice and poked a finger in Terra's direction.

"Fine thing to say about Father," Terra muttered.

"You know I'm not referring to him."

Inez turned to Luther. "If you're going to be part of this family, you'd better get used to them bickering and flinging the same old insults back and forth."

"It's all right. I understand. I have a sister and a brother."

"Any word yet on when you can return to active duty?" Terra asked. "The way many of the Gathering Parties in the tropics have been short-handed, we can use another able-bodied Fighting Carrier on call."

Luther placed his spoon aside, his gaze flickering toward his bowl. Phillipa could almost feel his emotional discomfort. She knew for some reason talking about the Fighting Carriers was painful for him. Whatever circumstances surrounded his accident must have been terrible.

"I may not be returning to the Fighting Carriers," he said after a moment.

Terra's brow furrowed. "The lung damage wasn't permanent, was it?"

"Terra." Inez cast her husband a chastising look.

"I'm sorry. It's really none of my business," Terra said. "It's just a damn shame if the organization loses a Carrier of your quality and experience."

"It's a fine organization," Moor said quietly. "However, I can understand his decision not to return."

"I know you had your issues with the Fighting Carriers, Moor, but what happened to you was an isolated case," Terra said. "It shouldn't have happened."

"But it did." Moor met Terra's gaze and Phillipa sensed the anger rising between the friends.

"Maybe we should drop the subject," Susana suggested.

"Good idea." Phillipa glanced at Luther, noting the tension in his expression. Eventually they would have to discuss the Fighting Carriers and whatever was bothering him so much that he was willing to forfeit his career. But not now and certainly not here in front of an audience.

"If the lung issue is lingering, maybe you should have Susana examine that as well," Terra ventured.

"There is no lung problem. I'm completely recovered. Now it's just a matter of getting back into shape."

Terra nodded, a smile flickering across his lips. "Good. You'll probably be ready by the time Gathering season starts. If not then, there's always next year."

"Maybe. There are other ventures outside the Fighting Carriers."

Terra looked about to speak, but Inez poked him with her elbow and the conversation turned to mundane things.

While Susana and Inez cleared the table, Moor walked to the window and glanced out. "It's still rather nice outside. The sun is shining and there's not a cloud in the sky. I think I'll take a walk to the bathhouse before dessert. It'll be nice after all that flying this morning. Anybody else?"

"I'm for it." Zach stood and stretched.

"Sounds excellent." Luther joined the two men who were headed for the door.

Terra also stood, but Phillipa said, "Wait a minute, Terra. I have to ask you something."

"Go ahead. Meet you there," Terra called to the other Horsemen, who left the house. A gust of crisp winter breeze swept through the room before Luther closed the door behind them.

"What is it?" Terra asked his sister.

"I don't mean to be rude, but would you mind if we talked outside?" Phillipa glanced at Susana, Inez and Sophia. They reassured her they were not offended and the brother and sister donned cloaks and left the house.

Outside, Phillipa glanced at the trail of footprints leading to the bathhouse where the other three Horsemen had gone for a dip in the pool of natural hot spring water. She knew Terra was probably eager to join them, so she got right to the point.

"Terra, do you know what sort of an accident Luther was in? He's reluctant to talk about it, but I gather whatever happened was terrible."

Terra nodded, a serious expression in his blue eyes. "It was about two months ago. An unforeseen storm came up in the Spikelands. One of those mini Spikes that occasionally happen before the real Spike season hits. Luther was leading a Gathering Party and he and his rider were the only survivors. From what I heard from some of the Fighting Carriers stationed in the village at the time, the rider's leg was crushed when Luther crash-landed. Luther was in very bad shape and hadn't been expected to live."

"I see," she murmured. No wonder he didn't want to discuss the accident or the Fighting Carriers.

"That's why I thought he might not have recovered enough to return to duty—at least not as an active Carrier. I'm glad to hear he's healed, though. It would have been a great loss, otherwise. He's a top-notch Fighting Carrier. I hope he doesn't quit."

"I hope he doesn't too," she admitted. At least, not for the wrong reasons. As a messenger, she'd seen riders take terrible falls—had even taken a few herself—and knew how hard it was to get back in the saddle. Fear could be incapacitating. Even for a Horseman as powerful as Luther.

* * * * *

That night, Phillipa slept at Inez and Terra's home, while Luther stayed at the Chieftain's longhouse where visitors were always welcome. At this time of year, especially, there was plenty of room since most of the Horsemen who worked the Gathering Parties had returned to their home villages for the off-season.

Hornview was a Gathering village and the Chieftain earned much of his income by hosting Gathering Parties. Private Carriers, who had the potential to become fairly wealthy, paid a percentage of their harvested Rock Blood to the Chieftain in return for housing and use of the village tack house and Running Way.

Luther considered becoming a private Carrier, should he decide to retire as a Fighting Carrier. That way he could still participate in Gatherings, but needn't carry a rider, as fewer rules applied to private Carriers than to Fighting Carriers. Though it was considered an insult to a Horseman to be used only as a Rock Blood carrier and not take a human rider on a Gathering, Luther was willing to accept the embarrassment. The thought of wounding or perhaps killing a rider, even accidentally, made him physically ill.

What had happened to him? At one time, he'd been practically fearless. From Ice Lizards to Stone Snakes, he'd fought some of the deadliest creatures on the planet. He'd sustained injuries that would have destroyed a lesser Horseman and had always recovered to fly and fight again.

But he'd never lost an entire Gathering Party before.

Terra had meant well when he'd asked if Luther would be returning to active duty, but he couldn't possibly understand how such a question made Luther feel. No one could understand how he felt. The guilt, the feeling of incompetence, was overwhelming, like a stranglehold, squeezing pride and happiness out of his life.

Meeting Phillipa had returned some of that happiness in a way he had never imagined possible. For the first time since the incident, he *enjoyed* waking up in the morning. She infiltrated his morbid thoughts and brought joy back to his life.

The last thing he wanted was to destroy those wonderful feelings by returning to a career that could once again thrust him headlong into disaster. That wasn't exactly true.

It wasn't himself he feared for, but for those he commanded. He could accept his own death, but he couldn't accept the loss of so many good Horsemen and riders because *he* had failed in his duty.

With a sigh, he walked across the longhouse and spread his blanket on the floor by the fireplace. He lay on his side and watched the flames dancing, trying to forget about that tragic flight. Phillipa. Think about her. That was easy enough.

A smile touched his lips and he closed his eyes, imagining she was there beside him. Her beautiful blue eyes, long black hair and voluptuous body danced across his thoughts as he drifted to sleep.

* * * * *

The dream wrapped him in its satiny warmth and he knew by the clarity of the sensations that it was a shared dream. He still lay on the floor in the longhouse, but Phillipa was beside him and the room was empty of the servants and few other guests who had fallen asleep there. Beneath the cover of blankets, Phillipa shifted position, her blue gaze meeting his. He tugged her atop him and groaned with pleasure at the sensation of her soft, smooth skin against him. As in other dreams, they were naked and ready for lovemaking.

"I thought these dreams were supposed to stop after we made love?" she asked.

"I guess we're just lucky," he murmured against her lips before claiming them with a kiss. His eyes slipped shut and he buried a hand in her hair, loving the feel of it sliding through his fingers.

Her tongue met his with long, tender strokes that fanned the flames of his already raging desire. Trapped between their bodies, his cock swelled and ached with need. As if reading his mind, she edged slightly aside, her mouth still locked with his, and curled her fist around his cock. Her grip tightened and she stroked him to full erection.

Luther's pulse raced and he resisted the urge to pin her to the floor and lunge into her like an untamed beast. He kept from rolling her onto her back and burying his lips against her neck.

"Oh gods," she panted, threading her fingers through his hair and trailing her feet along his legs.

One hand on her hip and the other braced beside her head, supporting most of his weight, he kissed her mouth again. Slowly he slid his hand from her hip to her soft mound. He took several moments to knead it, loving the feeling of pubic hair against his palm and the softness of her plump clit. Devouring her with kisses, he absorbed her moans of passion as he slid first one finger, then another into her damp pussy. Every part of her felt so good. She was new to him, yet at the same time soothingly familiar. There was no doubt they were made for each other.

When the kiss broke, she tightened her fist in his hair, not painfully, but with just enough force to arouse him even more. His gaze met hers and the lust in her eyes made his cock twitch. Gods, he needed her.

“Fuck me, Luther,” she whispered, her voice raw with passion. Little quivers of desire raced through her and she thrust her pelvis against his stroking hand.

He needed no further prodding and covered her body with his, the tip of his cock pushing against her lust-slicked pussy.

* * * * *

Luther snapped awake with a throbbing erection. His heart racing and breath coming in raw pants, he thrust his blanket aside and stood. Though the fire now burned low, the room seemed far too hot. His breeches felt horribly uncomfortable and he couldn't resist adjusting his cock. At the first brush of his hand against it, a tremor coursed through him.

That dream had been far too tempting. He needed some kind of relief, even if by his own hand.

He picked up his cloak and strode out of the longhouse. Maybe he could steal into the tack house. As aroused as he was from the dream, it would only take a few flicks of his hand.

Curling his lip, he chastised himself. What the hell was wrong with him? He was acting like a colt instead of a full-grown Horseman in control of himself. It was Phillipa. The woman did things to him he never imagined possible. Of course, he'd been with women before, but none had ever excited him as much as the beautiful, black-haired messenger.

Just as he'd expected, the tack house was empty. It took him a moment to undress and wrap his fist around his cock. After a few strokes, he paused, his heart racing and hand clamped tight around the base of his staff. This wasn't what he wanted. Yes, any sort of relief would be nice, but —

His ears twitched and a feeling of excitement swept through him. If it had been a shared dream, then most likely Phillipa was also aroused and probably just as wide awake.

He quickly switched to his beast-half, sprouted his full-coat and left the tack house, hoping no one happened to be outside at this time of night. In his present condition and in his half-equine form, it could prove rather embarrassing. The old saying “hung like a Horseman” did have basis in fact.

The moon lit his way through the clear, chilly night. He soared over the houses in the village square and across the snowy fields toward Inez and Terra's house. Phillipa had given him directions earlier that evening, but he hadn't known then how soon he'd be using them.

He landed a short distance from the house and approached as quietly as he could. Snow crunched beneath his hooves and his breath turned to white puffs in the cold air. A twinge of disappointment darted through him when he saw not even a hint of candlelight in the windows.

Though he knew it was wrong to peep in windows, he couldn't resist a quick look just to see if he could catch a glimpse of her. He approached the house and noticed movement in one of the windows.

His heart skipped a beat when he saw Phillipa gazing out at him. She disappeared and a moment later the door opened and she stepped outside, covered from head to toe in a hooded cloak.

"Couldn't sleep?" he asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"No better than you, apparently."

Smiling, he took her face in his hands, bent and kissed her. She slid her arms around his neck. Feelings of affection and desire overwhelmed him and he wanted nothing more than to fly off right then and marry her.

When the kiss broke, he stared into her eyes, his hands stroking her face and the column of her throat.

"In the mood for some courting?" he asked.

"Definitely."

"How do you feel about riding bareback?"

A smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "Maybe I should put on some trousers?" She opened her cloak, revealing her nightgown, though her feet were covered in riding boots.

"Only if you want to," he replied.

A hint of color rose in her cheeks and she moistened her lips with the tip of her adorable tongue. He hoped she wouldn't bother changing. The thought of galloping or flying with her bare legs wrapped around him was almost too exciting.

She beckoned him closer with a finger and again he bent. Her arms looped around his neck and she whispered in his ear, "I'm not wearing any undergarments."

He groaned with desire and wrapped his arms around her, holding her close.

"I guess that won't be a problem," she said.

"Absolutely not. Don't worry about being cold, either. I'll keep you warm."

"I know." She stepped back slightly and held his gaze for a moment before he knelt, making it easy for her to mount him.

Phillipa's heart raced as she slid onto Luther's back. The idea of riding him bareback, her body pressed so intimately against his, was even better than a fantasy. Already wet from their shared dream, she wondered if he'd feel her arousal through his

thick winter coat. She should feel uncomfortable, perhaps even embarrassed, but she didn't. Being with Luther, sharing every intimacy with him, seemed so right.

Using her knees for balance, she clasped his sides, moving with him when he rose to his feet. His body was hot and his warmth seeped into her so that even the cold winter night didn't affect her. Gods, it felt wonderful astride him.

"I've never felt anything like this," he said, glancing over his shoulder at her. "It's like you belong on me. I wish I could carry you always."

She wrapped her arms around his man-torso and rested her cheek against his back. "Gods, Luther, I—"

"Yes?"

What was wrong with her? She had almost said, "I love you." She couldn't possibly love him. They'd only just met. But she was already attached to him. She couldn't imagine him not being part of her life.

"I'm going back to stop by the longhouse," he said.

"What for?"

"I forgot to take the pond seed."

A quiver of desire raced through her. "Planning on some intense activity?"

"Yes. Very intense."

She drew a deep breath and released it slowly. Whatever activity he had planned, she was more than ready for it. Then she remembered he'd been quite ill not long ago.

"Are you sure you're up to it?" she asked.

He snorted with annoyance. "Excuse me?"

"You were injured recently and—"

"And the healer declared me sound over a month ago. I've been building up my stamina since and I assure you I'm not quite ready to be put out to pasture."

"I didn't mean that." She placed a hand on his equine shoulder and smoothed his thick winter coat. By no means did he look ready for retirement, but she knew how long it could take, even for a Horseman, to completely recover from a serious injury. "I was just concerned."

"I know. I guess a Horseman's stamina is a sensitive subject. Thank you for your concern, Phillipa," he said, not a trace of annoyance left in his voice. When he spoke to her in such an affectionate tone, she could have melted in spite of the winter chill.

He moved from walk to canter to gallop, then rose in the air with a speed that might have stolen her breath had he not moved so smoothly. Moments later, they landed in front of the longhouse. He stepped inside, then quickly reappeared.

"All right?" she whispered.

He nodded and again knelt for her to mount. He walked out of the village square and once he was far enough away that his hoofbeats wouldn't disturb anyone's sleep, he broke into a gallop.

Phillipa tightened her grip slightly on his torso, though she was a strong rider and used her legs to easily keep her seat. Not that riding a Horseman, especially a lover, was much like riding a true-horse. Oh the basic motions were the same, but there was a connection, a sensuality, that could never pertain to riding an animal. Luther was all man, with a beast side that aroused her beyond belief.

His speed increased so it felt like they were soaring over the snowy field, though he had yet to spread his wings. The rhythm of his hooves and the feeling of his powerful Horseman heart throbbing beneath her palms sent a thrill of pure desire through her.

"I'm going up," he called to her. "Are you ready?"

"Yes!"

Though she hadn't imagined it possible, his speed increased, then he spread his wings and they ascended.

Phillipa laughed with happiness. Never had she felt so free. This wasn't the first time she'd ever ridden a Horseman, but it was the first time she'd ridden one she lusted after.

"Hold tightly," he shouted above the roaring wind.

She obeyed, gripped him snugly and pressed her cheek against his back. The sensation was marvelous. She felt every powerful throb of his heart, felt the rise and fall of his back as he breathed deep and even.

Riding a Horseman in flight was considerably easier than when galloping on land. Now most of the tension in her legs derived from sexual stimulation rather than the need to keep her balance.

With blinding speed, he devoured mile after mile, soaring through the sky, tempting the wind itself. Several times Phillipa opened her eyes to glance below. The landscape rushed by and the cold wind made her eyes water, so she snuggled closer to Luther's back. He was not merely warm now but hot. Sweat dampened his coat, but his heat felt wonderful. Every churning motion of his legs galloping across the sky seemed connected to her clit somehow. His rhythm teased her toward ecstasy.

Nothing felt as marvelous as riding a creature this fast. She wondered how much longer he could keep such a pace. His heart pounded against her palms and cheek. His sleek muscles strained as he continued, challenging himself while at the same time pushing her closer and closer to climax. Unable to control herself, she clung to him tightly and rubbed her clit against the joining of his man and beast-halves. A tremor rushed through her at the intimate contact and with a sudden burst of speed he seemed to leap across the sky.

This pushed Phillipa over the edge. Gasping and crying out sharply, she writhed and shook as she came, her heart pounding and entire body tingling.

He slowed his pace and she loosened her grip on him, though she continued leaning against his man-back. The sensation of his damp coat over hard muscles felt wonderful. Resting in the aftermath of a most unique and intense orgasm, she listened to his harsh panting slow to normal breathing.

His hands covered hers, stroking them gently. "Phillipa?"

"Luther," she purred, squeezing him affectionately. "That was...I don't think I have the words. Thank you for a memorable ride."

"No, thank you. I've never experienced anything like that before."

Though his comment thrilled her, she laughed softly. "I'm sure you say that to all the girls."

"No woman has ever ridden me like you rode me tonight. That I swear."

Pleased by his words, she kissed his man-back while stroking his hot, damp chest. "It's still hours before dawn. Why don't you fly back to the village square so we can go into the tack house? I believe I owe you something. Like another rubdown and something even better."

"I can hardly wait." He made a wide, smooth turn and beat his wings, heading back to Hornview.

Luther landed in a field outside the village square so he could cool down with a walk before reaching the tack house.

"Do you want me to dismount?" Phillipa asked.

"No, love. You'll be too cold. Besides, I like you right where you are."

His words warmed her and Phillipa hugged his sides a bit tighter with her knees, while she caressed his back. She traced the sculpted muscles and ran her fingertips up and down his spine. A slight tremor coursed through him.

"Don't tell me that tickles too?" she teased.

"Just a little."

"A little," she purred, slipping her arms around him and fluttering her fingers over his taut belly.

"Stop it." He chuckled and grasped her hands. She tried tugging them away, but he refused to let go. The sensation of her hands trapped in his was so pleasant that she didn't bother struggling. After a moment, he loosened his grip and stroked the backs of her hands with his fingertips.

By the time they reached the tack house, he had cooled off enough to go directly inside for her promised rubdown. Phillipa dismounted, immediately missing the warmth of his body. She wrapped her arms tightly around herself and shivered a bit.

Once inside the tack house, Luther lit a lantern and carried it to the same stall he'd used earlier. His hooves clattered on the wooden floor and Phillipa loved the sound. It was comforting and she was beginning to know his personal rhythm. She would most likely be able to pick out the sound of his hoofbeats among other Horsemen.

He had left his grooming supplies in a box in a corner of the stall that he would be using during his visit in Hornview. Once he'd unlocked the box, he and Phillipa together began brushing him.

She raised an eyebrow when he curried and brushed himself rather quickly.

"In a hurry?" she asked.

"I can't wait to get my hands on you again," he admitted.

She felt the same way about him, but had no intention of skimping on the care of his gorgeous coat.

By the time she began the rubdown, both were eager for something even more intimate. Still, she relished every stroke of her hands over his steely muscles. She paid careful attention to his legs, running her hands over the sturdy, yet slender appendages. They were such long, powerful legs. She'd felt how they devoured mile after mile of frosty field and propelled them with breathtaking speed across the sky.

Finally, she moved to his man-half. Her hands swept over his chest and stomach, but he grasped her wrists gently and met her gaze.

"I can't wait any more," he said in a husky voice. After releasing her, he backed up a few steps, closed his eyes and shuddered as he switched to Huform. The floor trembled with the energy he expelled during the change.

She stared, fascinated though she had been around Horsemen all her life. His eyes still closed as the momentary weakness that followed shapeshifting passed, he drew a deep breath and released it slowly. His broad chest, lightly dusted with golden hair, expanded. Unable to resist, she ran her fingertips over his prominent ribs. His flat belly twitched and a smile played around his lips.

"You're not going to be one of those who can't resist torturing a ticklish person, are you?" he asked, opening first one eye, then the other, an amused expression on his face.

She gazed at him with feigned innocence. "Now why would you think that?"

"I have ways of dealing with a woman like you."

"Such as?"

"Such as I grab you." He took her wrists and gently held them behind her back. His elfin eyes stared deeply into hers. She loved the way the very corners tilted up. Gods, his lashes were so long and thick. "Then I kiss you."

Before she could continue admiring his eyes or any other part of him, he covered her mouth in a possessive kiss that sent little ripples of pleasure darting through her.

"Umm," she moaned softly, pushing her body even closer to his.

Her breasts flattened against his hard chest and she felt his thick, hard cock pushing against her.

His tongue stroked hers and thoroughly explored her mouth before he broke the kiss, leaving her panting and her pussy drenched with desire.

"Oh Luther," she murmured and tilted her head to the side so that he could easily run his lips and tongue along the side of her neck.

Finally he released her hands, wrapped an arm around her waist and buried his other hand in her hair. Phillipa embraced him tightly. She kneaded his powerful back and clutched handfuls of his thick, silky hair. His scent filled her and the heat of his body prevented her from feeling the chill in the air.

"Phillipa, I want you so much," he said.

"I want you too, Luther. Please. Please take me."

Again he kissed her mouth. His tongue traced her lips, then thrust between them, rubbing with long, slow strokes. Though his muscles tensed with need and his cock felt like steel between their bodies, he took his time kissing her, as if he couldn't get enough of her.

When he stepped away, a look of raw desire in his eyes, she felt almost too weak to stand. He took a blanket from the trunk, spread it on the ground, then guided her to it. Eager for him to fill her, she lay on her back, pulled up her nightgown and bent her knees, her thighs spread wide.

Rather than take her quickly like she knew he wanted to, he settled between her legs and covered her clit with his mouth. Sliding his hands beneath her, he cupped her buttocks and kneaded while he lapped and sucked her clit.

Sensations of pure bliss crashed over Phillipa. Closing her eyes, she writhed, almost overcome by pleasure, but he held her bottom tightly, keeping her lower half steady while his skilled tongue brought her to the edge of desire, then left her teetering, her heart pounding out of control.

"Oh Luther, please," she moaned, her fingers tight in his hair. "I can't stand any more. Just fuck me. Oh gods, please!"

He covered her swiftly, the tip of his engorged cock resting at the entrance of her drenched pussy. She felt his forearms on either side of her head, supporting most of his weight, then his lips hovered close to hers so that she felt the warmth of his breath against her mouth.

"Look at me," he whispered.

It was a struggle to open her eyes, but she obeyed. He stared at her intently as he slid into her inch by marvelous inch.

"Don't close your eyes," he said in a husky voice. "I want to look at you as I fill you. I want to see what I'm doing to you. I want you to see what you do to me."

Phillipa's heart pounded and her breath came in desperate pants. This was so incredibly arousing, staring deeply into his eyes at such a crucial moment. Her fingers gripped the well-defined muscles of his broad shoulders and she lifted her hips to meet him.

When he'd filled her completely, he remained still for a moment, the tension between them almost unbearable, yet she understood why he wanted it to last. Right now they were not simply one body from two, but a shared spirit as well. Never in her life had she felt more connected to another person in every way.

Dream lover. Fated to love one another until our dying breath.

He began thrusting into her, long, agonizingly slow strokes of his steely cock where she was so hot, wet and pulsing.

Gradually, he picked up his rhythm, stirring her desire.

“Oh Luther. Yes, oh please. Yes,” she panted, her hips matching his thrust for thrust until he drove into her so fast and hard that all she could do was cling to him and moan in ecstasy. She came so long that she thought the breath-stealing pulsations might never stop.

Chapter Six

Unity Feast

When Phillipa drifted back to reality, she realized Luther was still rock-hard inside her. Opening her eyes halfway, she found him staring at her with such intensity that she was surprised they both didn't burst into flames. Perspiration beaded his forehead and a droplet trickled down his temple.

Phillipa entangled her fingers in his hair and drew his face closer for a kiss. His lips, soft yet firm, moved sensually against hers. At the same moment he thrust his tongue into her mouth, he began thrusting his cock. He drew it out almost to the tip, then swooped back inside her.

The sensations of impending orgasm returned with shocking speed and her next climax came so quickly, it took her by surprise. Short, but almost painful in its intensity, it made her tingle from head to toe.

This time he didn't stop thrusting, but continued driving into her. His breath came in ragged pants. She ran her hands over his back, loving the feeling of his taut muscles beneath smooth, sweat-slicked flesh. His heat seeped into her, drenching her with passion.

She edged closer to a third climax, wondering if he could hold back long enough to hurl her into bliss once again.

"Phillipa, oh gods," he panted against her ear, every muscle in his body tense and straining.

"Luther, my darling," she gasped, clutching him hard with arms and legs. "I'm almost there. Oh please. Oh gods. Oh!"

She moaned as the third orgasm struck her. At that moment, his control snapped and he drove into her with several short, fast thrusts. With a savage cry, he came. His muscles bunched and his hips flexed hard.

A moment later, he collapsed atop her and groaned, a sound of complete satisfaction. She stroked his back and wove her fingers through his hair until he lifted his head and smiled at her.

"I know you won't marry me now, Phillipa, but will you accept an engagement?"

Her feelings for him nearly overwhelmed her and she knew that it wouldn't truly matter if they waited a week or a year, they belonged together. What could it hurt to accept his proposal now then take the time they needed to get to know each other better? In the back of her mind she recalled the looks the village women had given him when they arrived and she knew she wanted this Horseman marked as her own.

"Yes," she said without hesitation and slipped her arms around his neck. "Oh yes."

"Thank the gods." He raised his eyes to the heavens and chuckled.

"This is going to be the best Unity Feast ever," she said. "I'm so glad we met, Luther. I'm so happy we shared dreams."

"So am I, love." He rolled onto his back, pulled her atop him and hugged her tightly. "I don't deserve to be this happy."

She met his gaze and her smile faded when she realized his words hadn't been merely an empty expression. He actually believed he didn't deserve the joy of a dream lover.

"Yes, you do," she said.

He shook his head. "It doesn't seem fair that I'm here with you and the rest of my Gathering Party is—"

"Luther, accidents happen. You're a Fighting Carrier. You know the dangers—"

"I'm not so sure I'm going to be a Fighting Carrier, anymore."

"You can't just give up. No, don't look away from me." She placed a hand to his cheek in an attempt to prevent him from averting his gaze. It didn't work. He carefully moved her aside and stood.

Phillipa wrapped the blanket around her and approached him. "I know how hard you must have worked to become not only a Fighting Carrier, but an instructor. One of the *youngest* instructors ever, right? I saw the look in your eyes when you and Terra reminisced about the times you had in the Fighting Carriers. You love your job and you can't just walk away from it because of what happened."

"What do you know about it?" he demanded, his eyes narrowed in anger.

"I know that if you allow fear to control you, it will. That if you fall off a horse, you need to get back on—"

"It's not the same. I'm not afraid of the Spikelands. I'm not afraid of Gathering. I'd go back to it tomorrow, but not as leader of a Gathering Party and not with a human on my back."

She stared at him. Whether he knew it or not, he *was* afraid of returning to his job. Very afraid. And it was the worst kind of fear, because he didn't even realize he carried it. Or he was unwilling to admit it.

"I have the utmost respect for the Fighting Carriers. I love the organization, but I've done my time. Eighteen years, Phillipa. That's enough for any Horseman."

"It's only enough if you want it to be enough. You have much flying left in you, Luther. I felt it tonight."

"I never said I didn't. All I said was there are other pursuits I have to consider."

"Such as?"

"I don't want to discuss this, Phillipa."

"So you've said, but if we're going to plan a life together, we will have to discuss it eventually."

"You'll be well taken care of as my wife."

"I don't care about that," she said.

"You should."

"I'm able to support myself, Luther. I don't need a husband to take care of me."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he said, clearly annoyed.

His sensitivity was beginning to get on her nerves. She knew he had problems, but not talking about them wasn't going to help either of them.

"It means I didn't accept your proposal because I'm after your family's money," she snapped.

"I never said that."

"Good. Because for all I know, you don't have their money, anyway. You did say you're not on good terms with them. It might be me who supports us, after all."

His eyes flashed with fury, then he noted her teasing smile and relaxed a bit. "That's not funny."

"Messengers do make a decent living, you know. Not as much as the income from Lawton Orchards, but comfortable enough."

A playful glint in his eyes, he wrapped his arms around her. "So maybe I should retire after all."

"Don't wager on it, you son of a mule," she teased.

"Whatever decision I make will be the best one for both of us, Phillipa. You must trust me when I tell you I might no longer be able to properly serve as a Fighting Carrier."

"And you have to believe that, as your dream lover, I know more about you than you think."

For a long moment they held each other's gaze, matching one another's stubbornness. Then he brushed her lips with a chaste, affectionate kiss.

"I'd better get you back to your brother's before someone wakes up and wonders where you've gone."

She smiled. "They could probably guess."

He took her in his arms and she melted against him. For several moments, they stood in comfortable silence before he shifted to his beast-half, blew out the lantern and carried her home.

* * * * *

The following morning, Phillipa and Inez were cleaning up after the morning meal when Luther arrived.

"Would you like something to eat?" Inez asked him after Terra opened the door to let him in.

"No, thank you. I ate at the longhouse." He approached Phillipa and smiled, his gaze fixed on hers. "I trust you slept well."

Heat rose in her face when she thought of the intimacy they'd shared the previous night. "Very well. And you?"

He nodded, took her hand and squeezed it gently.

Someone tapped on the door and Terra answered it. Moor, Susana and Sophia stepped inside, stomping snow off their feet. Moor held his daughter who, upon seeing Canyon racing around the dinner table, shrieked with glee and reached toward the young Horseman.

"Canyon, no cantering in the house," Terra commanded. The boy stared defiantly at his father, trotted a few steps, then stopped at Terra's stern look.

Phillipa resisted the urge to smile. Canyon had certainly inherited his father's attitude. She turned to Luther and said, "I'm going to help Inez, Susana and Sophia for a couple of hours. We're preparing food for Unity Feast tomorrow. You're free to join us, if you want."

"Or you could take the coward's way out and babysit the children with me and Moor," Terra suggested.

"Where's Zach?" Inez asked.

"The Chieftain asked if he'd help set up for the gathering tomorrow. They have several wagonloads of wood to move for the Unity Feast bonfire," Sophia replied.

"Coming with us or not, Luther?" Terra asked.

"You could stay here and help us cook," Phillipa said, trying not to sound as hopeful as she felt. She wanted to spend as much time with him as possible, but she'd promised to help the women prepare for the feast.

"I'm not a bad cook, actually," he said. "If you can use the help."

Terra chuckled, exchanged glances with Moor and said, "Gods he is in love. Have fun, ladies." When Luther narrowed his eyes in mock anger, Terra added, "And Horseman."

"Think we should leave him alone with our women?" Moor asked in a teasing tone, though Phillipa sensed a bit of underlying jealousy. Not that Susana had given Luther a second glance.

"Of course," Terra said. "Luther is a gentleman. And I'll break all four of his legs if he tries anything."

"Terra!" Phillipa and Inez snapped in unison.

"You and what Gathering Party?" Luther chuckled. "Don't worry. Your women are safe with me."

"As if we need a keeper," Susana scoffed. "Moor, just take Terra and the children and go play while we get some work done."

"We're going," Terra said, a shudder racing through him as he sprouted his full-coat. It was pitch black, except for a white blaze that ran down his nose like a streak of lightning. He turned to his son. "Canyon. Full-coat."

The young Horseman closed his eyes and shivered into his cover of sleek black hair, accented by a white snip at the tip of his nose. The small group left the house.

"We'd better get to work," Sophia said, tugging a recipe book out of the folds of her cloak. "We're in charge of making cookies for the gathering."

"Everybody brings a dish to the gathering in the evening," Phillipa explained. "It starts after sundown."

"Inez and I will prepare for the meal at home and Phillipa, Sophia and Luther can start on the cookies," Susana said.

Everyone agreed that sounded like a worthy plan and set to work. Soon, lively chatter and the delicious scent of cookie batter, baked apples and cinnamon cake filled the house.

Never had Phillipa enjoyed cooking so much. She wasn't keen on domestic chores, but with Luther around their tasks seemed to fly by. Though she'd said she didn't want to appear lovesick, she couldn't help stealing glances in his direction every chance she got. To her satisfaction, almost every time she looked at him, he was already staring at her.

Around noon, Zach arrived, having completed his work in the village square. A short time later, Terra and Moor returned with the children and the group took a break for the midday meal. Phillipa and Luther used the opportunity to announce their engagement and received many happy congratulations. Afterward, everyone helped clean up the house and pack the cookies into baskets for tomorrow's gathering.

Once their friends left for their homes, Luther asked Phillipa if she'd like to go for a ride. She immediately donned her cloak and joined him outside where he had changed to his beast-half. He stood by a fence while she mounted, then he took off at an easy canter. Once he'd put some distance between them and the house, he slowed to a leisurely walk.

Phillipa began feeling excited about the coming holiday. That sensation hadn't changed much since she was a child.

"I love Unity Feast," she said. "I only wish my father was still around."

"I know," Luther said. "My father wasn't much for celebrations, but he had other qualities."

"Were you close to him?"

"I suppose," he sighed. "In a way. Closeness isn't exactly encouraged in the Woodfield-Shire family. We're expected to be loyal, but emotions are considered obscene or something." He gave a slight chuckle, but Phillipa didn't sense much humor in it. "The times I remember being closest to him were when I trained for the Classics Competitions. He was very involved in those. The entire Woodfield-Shire line is."

"I'm sorry, I don't know too much about the Classics."

"I don't blame you. It's not the most exciting sport in the world. I mean, it should be, considering it's derived from the training of Fighting Carriers from ancient times. All the categories the participants are judged in are based either on combat movements or gait in flight and on land."

"I heard something about that. Doesn't the most collected Horseman win?"

"Basically."

"How did you place?"

"Rather well, but it's a ridiculous sport, especially considering how most of the old families who participate have lost respect for Fighting Carriers, yet they're willing to play warrior."

"It doesn't make much sense when you put it that way."

He laughed. "After joining the Fighting Carriers, I realized just how silly the competitions are. It's quite a different thing testing your gaits in the Spikelands or engaging in combat with an Ice Lizard than prancing around an arena with relatively no danger. I only competed in the Classics to please my father."

"That was nice of you. He must have been proud."

"I suppose. He expected me to continue competing and also take over Lawton Orchards."

"And you had no interest in that? Even for the prestige?"

He snorted. "It's an orchard, Phillipa. The apples grow. We harvest the apples. Then we distribute the apples. Yes, it's as exciting as it sounds."

"It can't be *that* bad."

"You'll see. I'm going to take you there so you can meet my sister and brother."

She noticed he mentioned nothing about his mother, so Phillipa didn't press him for a reason.

Placing a hand between his shoulder blades, she stroked his coat. Using her knees for balance, she raised herself on his back, brushed his long blond hair aside and kissed his neck.

"I love how that feels," he said, tilting his head forward slightly.

She rained kisses down his neck and across his shoulders, then slid her arms around him, closed her eyes and rested her cheek against his back.

"I love being with you," she murmured.

His hand covered hers lightly. "I love being with you too."

* * * * *

The next morning, Canyon woke the adults in the house early to open the Unity Feast gifts, then they ate the morning meal and prepared for their guests. Moor, Susana,

Zach, Sophia and their children would be arriving around noon to share the midday meal. Then they would all go to the gathering in the village square.

Luther was the first to arrive. Phillipa answered the door and he stood for a moment, gazing at her. She'd taken special care grooming that morning and had carefully braided her hair and dressed in the new embroidered shirt Terra and Inez had given her for Unity Feast.

"You look lovely," he said.

"Thank you."

"Here." He handed her a bottle of cider. "I'd packed it in my saddle bag the night we left my cabin."

She read the label and smiled. "Lawton Orchards."

"Let me see that." Terra took the bottle from Phillipa. "This is good stuff."

"The best?" Phillipa grinned, meeting Luther's gaze.

He shrugged. "I'm biased, remember."

A short time later, the other guests arrived and they sat down to a delicious meal of meat pie, baked apples, cinnamon bread and vegetables that had been canned earlier in the year.

Once the dishes were done, Phillipa and Luther joined Canyon, Terra, Moor, Zach and Sophia outside for a snowball fight. Then, while the children played a safe distance from the hearth, the adults sipped tea and talked until it was time to leave for the gathering in the village square.

Throughout the day, Phillipa could hardly keep her gaze from Luther and she was pleased that each time she looked in his direction, he was gazing at her as well. This was without a doubt the best Unity Feast she'd ever had. A perfect day in the company of family, friends and, best of all, her dream lover.

When they arrived at the village square, many people already mingled in the longhouse and by the enormous bonfire outside. Everyone ate, talked and played games until after dark, when several villagers brought out musical instruments. Then the dancing began to the sound of drums, flutes and harps.

Phillipa stood sipping from a mug filled with warm cider when Luther, who had been talking to Zach, approached.

"May I have this dance?" he asked.

Usually Phillipa wasn't much for dancing, but she had no intention of refusing such a handsome partner.

"I'd love to." She took the hand he offered and they found a spot amidst the couples dancing in the center of the longhouse.

They whirled and stomped to the lively song. When the music ended, they joined Inez, Terra and Canyon by the hearth where they were enjoying warm drinks and cookies. Luther slipped his arm around Phillipa's shoulders and she rested her head against his chest as she watched flames leap in the fireplace.

"This was a perfect day," she said softly.

"Yes." He kissed the top of her head. "It was. Thank you, Phillipa. If not for you, I'd be moping around my cabin alone."

She edged even closer and smiled, utterly content.

* * * * *

Two nights later, Phillipa and Luther decided to go to her home so they could spend private time together without resorting to late night-trysts in the tack house. Before leaving Hornview, Luther scheduled an appointment with Susana toward the end of the week to find a replacement herb for the pond seed. Trying new herbs could be risky, so Susana suggested he stay in Hornview for at least a day so she could keep watch over his reaction.

Though Phillipa's home was less than an hour's flight from Hornview, their journey took longer, since they needed to take Black Silk with them. Neither minded the extra time. Luther invited her to ride him rather than the horse and she agreed without hesitation.

He loved how she felt on his back, the sensation of her strong legs snug against his sides. During the ride, she often stroked his hair and caressed his man-back and shoulders. She seemed to know exactly how he liked to be touched. Even those gentle caresses aroused him and he longed to make love to her again.

"I can hardly wait to get home," Phillipa said. They made their way down a road covered with packed, dirty snow. People had apparently taken advantage of the past few clear days to travel before more storms came up. "I love staying with Terra and Inez, but we had so little time alone while in Hornview."

"I have to admit, I'm looking forward to making love in a bed rather than on the tack house floor." He glanced at her over his shoulder. Gods, she was beautiful. The hood of her black cloak blended with her hair and the crisp winter air tinted her high cheekbones pink. Her wide set blue eyes glistened within their frames of thick, dark lashes.

She chuckled and kissed the back of his neck. "So am I. Thanks for coming home with me."

"It's my pleasure. Thank you for offering. Living with you is much more pleasant than that cabin in the woods."

"Glad to hear it."

Though he had agreed to move into her home so they could spend time together while she continued her messenger work, he fully intended to contribute to the household. Since he knew how much her work meant to her, he would never force her to stop after their marriage, but he wanted her to know that she didn't *need* to work.

Even if he didn't return to the Fighting Carriers, he had other prospects and he also had inherited a large sum of money upon his father's death. Of course, it wasn't nearly

as much as he would have received had he not left Lawton Orchards, but he was surprised his father had left him anything at all. The family had made it clear they considered his career choice an embarrassment, but he hadn't cared. He still didn't.

They could never understand his connection to the Fighting Carriers, and explaining it only proved to be a waste of time. They could never know the pride he felt upon being accepted into their ranks or the feeling of accomplishment each time he participated in a successful Gathering. There was no way to properly describe the satisfaction of knowing he made an important contribution, no matter how small, to the survival of their races.

One of the things he loved about Phillipa was that she shared his respect for the Fighting Carriers. Having come from a family of Fighting Carriers, she could understand his dedication to them. Perhaps she understood all too well, which was part of the reason he'd avoided discussing his accident with her. Already she had come too close to guessing his feelings regarding what had happened during that tragic Gathering and if anyone could convince him to return to the Fighting Carriers, she was most likely the one.

Facing that decision was inevitable. Very soon, he would be required to either reenlist or retire. Phillipa had said he had much flying left in him and she was right. His health had returned and the flight he'd taken with Phillipa a few nights ago had proven that all the training he'd done since his recovery had paid off.

Most likely he could pass the test required by the Fighting Carriers before he returned to active duty. And if he couldn't pass now then he would with a few more weeks of training. He felt ready in body, but not in mind.

Many nights he'd lain awake, going over every moment of that last Gathering and wondering what he could have done differently. They had been nearly finished collecting Rock Blood when he'd sensed a change in the weather. He hadn't thought much of it then, but looking back, should he have ordered the Gathering Party to leave earlier? Would it have made a difference?

Had he been more concerned with looking incompetent by ending a Gathering before the Carriers were fully loaded than with placing his people in danger? No. He'd ended Gatherings early when he felt the situation warranted it. Even if it meant a personal reprimand, he had always taken the side of caution rather than recklessness.

He had always stood behind every decision he'd made. Now he questioned himself. That was a sign that he shouldn't return to duty. If he'd lost his nerve, then he had no business leading Gathering Parties, but how could he have lost it after eighteen years?

"Luther, are you all right?" Phillipa asked, breaking his thoughts.

"Yes. Why?"

"You just got very quiet all of a sudden."

"Sorry. My thoughts are drifting."

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"I'd rather talk about us."

"What about us?"

"Where do you want the wedding to take place? What kind of ring would you like for an engagement present?"

"I'd like you to surprise me."

"For which?"

"The ring. As for the wedding, I'm not too concerned about where, just as long as the people closest to us are there."

"That would be Terra, Inez and your friends from Hornview and my sister and brother. There are a few friends I'd like to ask as well."

"What about your mother?"

"She won't come."

"Maybe she'll surprise you?" Phillipa ventured.

Luther snorted. "You don't know my mother."

They continued making wedding plans for the rest of the ride and even started discussing the possibility of marrying in the spring. Though he sensed her apprehension about making their union permanent so quickly, he also noticed she seemed more comfortable with the idea of marriage than she had just a few days ago.

Already he couldn't imagine a future without her. Even stranger, he could hardly recall what life was like before her. Perhaps it was the dream sharing, but he felt as if they had always been together and always would be.

When they reached Phillipa's home just outside the village square at Owlhill, they went directly to her barn. While Luther removed his tack, she brought Black Silk to his stall and walked around, greeting her other horses, which she had left in the care of a trusted neighbor. They all looked healthy and well tended, but by the way they greeted her, he knew they were glad to have their mistress back.

"Very nice group," Luther said, walking past several stalls and glancing at the equine residents. Several of the more curious ones stuck their heads in his direction and he stroked their noses.

"I think so," she replied.

"Looks like a few of them are too old for messenger work, though."

"I try not to sell my horses. Once I buy one, it has a home for life. It can be an expense, but I've seen too much cruelty among some messengers when their horses reach retirement through age or injury. Maybe it's my Horseman half."

"I don't know about that. I've seen plenty of cruel Horsemen. You're a kind woman, Phillipa."

She smiled slightly, looking almost uncomfortable with the compliment. She was such an arousing contradiction. Sometimes cocky, sometimes modest. With her he never knew what was coming next and he loved that about her.

"And you're very beautiful," he continued, striding toward her. He took her face in his hands and used his thumbs to stroke her smooth cheeks. He loved the softness of her skin, the way she looked at him with lust and underlying affection in her beautiful eyes. He knew how much she valued her independence, but he also sensed that she wanted to be with him as much as he wanted her.

He needed to prove to her that he wasn't the sort of Horseman who would try to control every part of her life and make her into a different kind of woman. He liked her free spirit and the way she had the strength to pursue a career as a messenger in a world often dominated by men. While he appreciated those qualities in her, he also knew she needed to be treated like a woman and that was a need he had every intention of fulfilling.

He covered her mouth with a gentle kiss. Phillipa's eyes closed and she edged closer, her gloved hands roaming from his chest to his shoulders and back. Gradually Luther deepened the kiss, using his tongue to trace her lips, then thrust into her warm, wet mouth. He explored her thoroughly. Her tongue met his, rubbing sweetly, giving and receiving pleasure, and his belly tightened with desire. When the kiss broke, she continued leaning against him and gazing into his eyes.

"Don't look at me like that," she said a bit breathlessly.

"Why not?" In truth, he couldn't tear his gaze from her. She had him entranced.

"Because I need to take care of Black Silk and you need to be groomed."

"I have a better idea. Why don't you let me groom both Black Silk and myself while you go start a fire and get ready for bed?"

"But it's not even dusk."

He bent and spoke against her lips. "Who cares?"

When he kissed her again, she swayed toward him. Her tongue met his stroke for stroke. He caressed her back, then wrapped his arms around her and tugged her even closer.

"You're right," she murmured, a slight smile on her lips. "Who cares? I'll meet you in the house."

"I'll be there soon."

She stood on tiptoe and touched her lips to his with one more quick kiss before she left the barn.

Chapter Seven

Partners?

By the time Luther stepped into the cottage, Phillipa had a fire burning in the hearth. Its glow lit the room and danced over the sage green curtains drawn over the large window. The pleasant aroma of burning wood filled the air and he sighed with pleasure as he glanced around for Phillipa while removing his cloak. He tossed it onto a chair and began unfastening the ties on his shirt, but stopped abruptly, enraptured, as she stepped naked from behind the tall cedar screen in a far corner of the room.

Long tendrils of gleaming raven hair hung down her back and draped her shoulders. Her full, proud breasts bounced with every step. The rosy nipples were already stiff, an enticing adornment to the luscious ivory spheres. He longed to take them in his hands and knead the smooth flesh. He could almost feel the plump nipples on his lips and tongue.

Finally managing to move away from her breasts, his gaze swept her taut abdomen. Sleek muscles flowed into the deliciously feminine swell of her lower belly. He imagined his lips traveling over her stomach, then kissing down the length of one shapely leg and up the other. Just looking at her was enough to make his cock twitch with desire.

When she offered a teasing smile and ran her fingertips between her breasts, down her stomach and over her thatch of dark pubic hair, his cock swelled. He could scarcely wait to be rid of the damn breeches.

"Gods, you're beautiful," he said and quickly pulled off his shirt.

"So are you," she said.

His lips flickered in a smile. Not taking his eyes from her, he tugged a chair away from the square wooden table and sat to remove his boots. He'd just tugged one off when Phillipa dropped to her knees in front of him and pulled off the other. The sultry look in her eyes sent a ripple of lust down his spine. How the hell had he gotten this lucky? Luther had never had a shortage of female admirers, nor had he been celibate, but he'd come to believe he'd never actually fall in love.

Long ago, he'd fantasized about having a dream lover. Most young Horsemen did. As years passed with no sign of the mystical dreams, he'd resigned himself to the fact that he was not a Horseman who would experience dream sharing. Not everyone did.

Now here he sat with an irresistible woman to whom he grew more attached each passing day. He didn't deserve to be this happy, yet the gods had seen fit to send Phillipa to him. Maybe that in itself made it wrong for him to question his good fortune.

"Luther." She edged nearer and knelt between his legs. A hand on each inner thigh, she massaged closer and closer to his pelvis. He didn't need to look down to know about the sizeable bulge in his trousers. His erection pressed uncomfortably against the restraint of the heavy winter breeches. Phillipa raised herself higher on her knees, her lovely eyes half closed as she leaned nearer for a kiss. Her soft, slightly moist lips covered his while at the same time she cupped the front of his breeches.

Luther closed his eyes to thoroughly enjoy the sensations. Her tongue slipped into his mouth and his tongue met it stroke for stroke. Running his fingers through her hair, he reveled in its silkiness before placing his hands on her shoulders and stroking down her arms.

Her fingers outlined the shape of his cock through the trousers, teasing him until he could bear no more. He needed to feel her skin against his. When she stroked him, he wanted to feel her hand on his shaft. Perhaps she'd even use her mouth on him. His pulse quickened and erection grew even more at the thought of it.

Grasping her shoulders, he gently pushed her back and stood. He quickly shed his breeches. Before he had a chance to do anything else, she crawled toward him on her hands and knees, positioned herself in front of him, grasped his cock in both hands and took the bulging head between her lips.

"Gods, Phillipa," he murmured, burying his hands in her hair.

Her tongue laved his cock head, then flicked the underside over and over. Luther's buttocks tightened and his hips thrust closer to her. He wanted to close his eyes, but at the moment couldn't bear to look away from the breathtaking sight of her raven head between his legs. He stared intently as she drew his cock so deeply into her mouth that the crown of his erection brushed the back of her throat. She sucked and sucked, making him groan with pleasure.

"Phillipa. Phillipa," he breathed, unable to think of anything else to say. Actually, he couldn't think at all as he focused on the wonderful sensations breaking over his body.

She grasped his balls and kneaded while continuing to suck and lave his cock. If she kept this up much longer, he wouldn't be able to control himself. Fuck, he was like a colt who'd suddenly discovered breeding.

Having her lick and suck him like this was even better than flying.

As if sensing that she'd pushed him to the breaking point, Phillipa pulled away and sat back on her heels, gazing at him with fire in her wide set blue eyes. She licked her lips, almost as if savoring his taste.

Never in his life had Luther been this aroused and he wanted to return the favor.

He reached down and cupped her chin in his hand, tugging gently until she rose to her feet. "Come."

They walked to the bed and she allowed him to guide her onto her back. He straddled her, keeping his full weight on his knees, and gazed down into her eyes. She watched him with a look of wonder he found most arousing.

"You know what you do to me, don't you, Phillipa?"

"I have an idea," she said in a teasing tone.

"Those lovely lips." He brushed a fingertip over her plump rosy mouth. "And that wicked tongue have me ready to burst with pleasure."

"Good," she murmured and drew a deep breath that expanded her deliciously full breasts. The passion in her eyes was almost irresistible. "I want you to fuck me. Arousing you aroused me too. Luther, I want you so badly."

His eyes closed for a moment and he arched his neck back, wanting nothing more than to thrust his stiff cock deep inside her and pump until they both soared higher than any Horseman could fly.

But he had no intention of rushing. Not when waiting could increase their pleasure even more. Phillipa reached for his cock, but he grasped her wrists, slid down her body and pinned her hands above her head. His cock trapped between them, he covered her mouth in a deep, tender kiss. No matter how aroused he was, he always wanted her to know that he cared for her. There would always be a measure of affection in every kiss and touch whenever they made love.

His fingers entwined with hers and they gripped one another before he moved slightly aside and buried his lips against her neck. He took his time covering her entire neck with kisses. Then he moved to her shoulder. He intended to kiss every inch of her, savoring each curve and plane.

Slowly he kissed his way across her collarbone to her opposite shoulder. His lips trailed down her arm to her hand, where he used the tip of his tongue to trace shapes in her palm. It was callused in places from her years of working with horses, but that hint of hardness on a body so warm and smooth aroused him even more. He gently sucked each finger, lapping the soft pads and teasingly nipping the tips.

"Luther, I love how you touch me." She used her free hand to stroke his hair and caress as much of him as she could reach.

"I love touching you," he said between kisses. Shifting position slightly, he kissed one of her breasts thoroughly, moving in ever-narrowing circles toward her nipple. When he reached the taut bud, took it between his lips and sucked, Phillipa cried out in pleasure and clutched his head, pressing him closer.

Luther sucked her nipple and swirled his tongue over it until she writhed beneath him in pleasure-pain. Then he moved to her other breast. He covered it with kisses, licked and sucked her nipple and bit it gently before he began lapping underneath her breast. That must have tickled because she giggled and squirmed.

"Luther, oh please stop." She laughed. "That tickles so much!"

"Aha," he said. "Aren't you the woman who loves to torture me because I'm ticklish? It's time for me to get even."

"No, no!" She screeched with laughter when he began the same ticklish torture beneath her other breast.

Finally he took pity on her and moved to her stomach. He kissed it, feeling it swell with each panting breath. He rolled his tongue in her navel and covered her clit with his mouth. The nub was warm and swollen with desire.

"Ah, Luther!" she cried, this time in ecstasy. She was so aroused that he licked slowly, carefully so as not to push her stimulated body over the edge too soon. Holding her by the hips to prevent her from writhing, he stopped licking her clit and thrust his tongue into her pussy. Damn, she was hot, and drenched with passion. His heart leapt at the thought of sliding his cock into her. Soon. Very soon.

After thoroughly exploring her pussy with his tongue, he did as he'd sworn to and kissed her legs from thighs to ankles. Taking first one foot in his hand then the other, he massaged her soles and kissed her arches.

"Luther, please," she whispered, gazing at him through half-closed eyes. Her fingertips stroked her breasts. One hand slid down her belly and cupped her soft mound. Her back arched and he stared at her, licking his lips, his heart pounding with arousal as she stroked herself closer and closer to ecstasy.

But he had no intention of allowing her to come by her own hand. Not when he was finally ready to drive them both to bliss. He grasped her wrist and tugged her hand away. At the same moment she reached for him, he covered her body with his, filling her slick pussy with a long, slow thrust.

"Oh Luther!" she cried, her eyes closed and neck arched against the pillow.

He drove into her in a fast, steady rhythm that almost immediately pushed her over the edge. Luther settled in for a long, heart-pounding ride. His hips pumped while he kissed her face and neck then he covered her mouth with his, his tongue thrusting in time with his cock.

Phillipa's tongue met his, stroking with feverish need. Her hands swept down his sides and slid over his lower back. She found his Turning Point and the rush of pleasure was so great that he groaned, a guttural sound torn from his throat. The caress of her soft, wet pussy against his cock and her gentle, kneading hands on his Turning Point nearly shattered his control.

He knew by the sound of her breathing and the way her hips thrust against his that she was about to come again. If he could only hold out long enough—

Crying out sharply, she came. Her pussy clamped around his cock and her fingers pressed against his Turning Point. Luther unleashed his passion entirely and surged into her. He tore his mouth from hers, moaned and gasped, thoroughly lost in the grip of passion.

* * * * *

Phillipa awoke to Luther moaning, tossing and turning beside her.

"Luther." She touched his shoulder and noted he felt feverish. "Wake up."

He snapped awake, panting. The look of desperation in his eyes struck at her heart. Whatever he'd been dreaming about must have been terrible.

"Are you all right?" she asked, brushing hair from his face. "You're really hot."

"Fine." He stood and retrieved his pond seed powder, then walked to the table where he poured water from a pitcher into a wooden mug.

Phillipa watched him swallow the pond seed. She reached for her robe and slipped it on before leaving the bed and approaching him.

"Bad dream?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Tell me about it," she said softly and rested her hand on his arm.

"I was flying in the Spikelands. Lost in a storm. I couldn't see through the squalls. Just like —"

"Just like what happened during the incident with your Gathering Party."

"Why don't you go back to bed? I'll join you in a while."

"Luther, if what happened is still haunting your dreams, then you need to talk about it."

"I already have talked about it. Talking won't change what happened." His fists clenched. "If only I had given the order to leave the Spikelands sooner. If my instincts had been better —"

"You can't live with that kind of guilt. It's crazy."

"I have no choice."

"Accidents happen. Surely you —"

"You weren't there, so you can't judge."

Though his sharp tone stung, she knew he'd spoken in grief.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It's all right."

"No, it's not. I have no business venting my anger on you."

She took his hand. The heat from his palm seeped into her and she noted with relief that the pond seed had started to work. Sweat misted his face and glistened through the golden hair on his chest.

Luther had explained that when the herb worked properly, it would cause him to sweat almost instantly. The delay in his reaction was becoming longer and the pond seed worked less effectively. She knew he was eager for the appointment with Susanna so they could find a new treatment.

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. "Go to bed, love. As soon as I cool off, I'll join you."

Phillipa nodded and walked back to the bed where she slipped off her robe and tossed it on a nearby chair, then climbed under the covers. For several moments she

watched him pace quietly in front of the fireplace then walk to the window and stare out. She wished he'd talk to her about how he felt. Something told her if he finally discussed his tangled emotions he'd overcome the fear and guilt plaguing him.

Not that she expected him to bare his innermost thoughts so easily. She knew the Fighting Carrier sort. Many times their very lives depended upon the ability to thrust aside pain and weakness. It was difficult for a warrior to talk about the feelings attached to his duty, especially with a civilian like her who had never endured the same difficulties. In Luther's case few Fighting Carriers had experienced the tragedy of losing an entire Gathering Party. He must feel completely alone and she wished for some way to help him.

By the time Luther returned to bed, Phillipa was nearly asleep. Still, she cuddled close to him, felt his arm slip around her and his kiss on her hair before she drifted off.

* * * * *

The following morning, Phillipa awoke much later than usual. Luther had already left the cottage and she wondered where he'd gone.

The answer became apparent once she'd washed, dressed and stepped outside. Luther, wearing his beast-half and full-coat, strolled around the paddock where he'd turned out her horses for some fresh air and exercise.

Black Silk and several others whinnied to her in greeting.

"Good morning," Luther called and cantered toward her. She melted into his arms and accepted his kiss.

"I've already fed and cared for the horses," he said.

"Thank you so much. I never usually sleep this late."

"We've had plenty of excitement lately."

"Doesn't seem to have affected you," she teased.

"Oh yes, it has. Thanks to you, I feel like a new Horseman. I have something for you." He reached into the pouch around his neck and removed a gold ring with a large oval sapphire surrounded by tiny amethysts. He took her hand and slipped the ring on her finger. "I flew to Beetlebird Bay early this morning. There's a jeweler there who does lovely work. I was going to have a ring made for you, but when I saw this one it seemed perfect."

"It is." She stared at the exquisite piece of jewelry adorning her hand. "Luther, this is beautiful."

"Not half as beautiful as the woman wearing it."

Placing his hands on her shoulders, he bent to kiss her.

No sooner had their lips met than a woman called, "Phillipa! Phillipa!"

She turned to see the seamstress from the village square riding toward them on her aging donkey.

"Come on," Phillipa said to Luther.

They left the paddock and met Phillipa's visitor a short distance from the house.

"Sheila, how are you?" Phillipa asked.

"Just fine." Sheila, a bony woman of middle years, gazed appreciatively at Luther. "Who is your friend?"

"This is Luther, my fiancé." It felt strange but good introducing Luther as such. "Luther, this is Sheila."

"Fiancé! Phillipa, I had no idea you had a beau. When were you planning to bring him to the village square and introduce him to everyone?"

"We just got back last night."

"But dear, when did it start?"

"As long as we're asking questions," Phillipa said, an amused gleam in her eyes, "what are you doing out here?"

"There have been quite a few messages delivered in your absence. I've been holding these for the messenger who is covering for you. He's been out on deliveries since early this morning. A couple of these looked fairly important." Sheila reached into the folds of her cloak and removed a stack of parchment bound with a string. "I decided to take a ride out here to see if you might have returned early from your brother's. Looks like I'm in luck."

Phillipa took the messages, broke the string and glanced at them. "I'll deliver them today while the clear weather holds."

"Thank you."

"Thank you for collecting them while I was gone. Would you like to come in for a cup of tea?"

"I'd love to, but I need to get back to my shop."

Though Phillipa liked Sheila well enough, she wasn't in the mood for her gossip. Not when she wanted to be alone with Luther. Unfortunately, duty called and she'd be away from home for most of the day.

"Nice to meet you, Luther," Sheila said, her gaze once again sweeping him from head to hoof.

"You too," he said politely.

Sheila turned her donkey toward the path to the village. As soon as she was out of earshot, Phillipa said, "The entire village will know about you by this afternoon. Sheila delivers more news by word of mouth than I do with this messenger service."

He gave a snort of laughter.

"She seemed to be ogling you a little too much for my taste," Phillipa noted. "But I already saw in Hornview that was going to be a problem."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't tell me you haven't noticed you have no shortage of female admirers."

He shrugged and she nearly laughed aloud. Like most Horsemen, he was well aware of his attributes. Even ugly Horsemen were usually conceited. One as gorgeous as Luther surely couldn't help being aware of his beauty. Considering his exceptional handsomeness, he wasn't nearly as arrogant as many other Horsemen she'd known.

"I'd better saddle up Louise and deliver these messages." She sighed, nodding toward an energetic black filly who nosed around in the snow.

"Why not help me saddle up instead?" he suggested. "I can fly faster than she can run. Unless you don't want me interfering in your business?"

"Interfering? I'd love it. You don't mind?"

"Sometimes, Phillipa, I wish we didn't have to sleep, so I could carry you day and night."

His words warmed her so much that she smiled and embraced him. "Let's take the horses in and get to work."

A short time later, they were flying through the bright winter day. Luther's body heat kept her comfortably warm and he flew so fast and smoothly that the messages would be delivered in scarcely any time. Best of all, she had his company. Never had she enjoyed making deliveries as much as she did today.

They returned home by midday and, after Luther's rubdown, they walked to the house for a meal. Seated at the table, they enjoyed bread and smoked meat.

Phillipa said, "That was the most fun I've ever had making deliveries. Thank you for a most pleasant ride." She punctuated her sentence by reaching under the table and squeezing his knee.

He grasped her hand and stroked her palm and wrist. "Happy to accommodate. As we were flying, I had an idea."

"What is it?"

"How would you like a partner in your messenger service?"

His suggestion surprised her, though pleasantly. Still, she wasn't naïve enough to think he could ever be truly happy as a messenger.

"We could fly together on slow days and on busy ones we could split up to deliver more messages," Luther suggested.

"I'd love to work with you, Luther. At least until you return to the Fighting Carriers."

His smile faded. "I won't be returning."

"Luther, listen to me." She edged her chair closer to his and prepared herself for his anger. "I loved riding you on those deliveries today, but you can't seriously want to do messenger work for the rest of your life. You would be bored out of your mind."

"I doubt I could ever be bored working with you."

"Sweet as you are for saying that, it's not the truth."

He sighed and raised his eyes to the heavens. "You don't want me interfering in your business permanently. I understand."

"That's not it."

"I've been considering other prospects. I could become a private Carrier, as I said before. Then there's the option of returning to Lawton Orchards."

"I thought the family disowned you?"

"They'd take me back if I asked."

The look of distaste in his eyes was enough to convince her that he'd be absolutely miserable if he went crawling back to Lawton Orchards.

"You said you hated the family business."

"Hate is a rather strong word."

"Luther, be honest. You can't hide in a safe career you despise. Not a Horseman like you, with the heart of a Fighting Carrier."

His expression hardened. He stood and strode to the window across the room. Gazing outside, he said, "I had the heart of a Fighting Carrier, but no longer."

"That's not true."

"Phillipa, I will not be returning to that organization. If you can't accept that —"

"I can accept anything you want to do," she stated, her own anger rising. "But you're not doing what you really want."

"I'm doing what's best. Are you going to support me or fight me?"

"I don't want to fight you." She approached and touched his arm.

He glanced at her and shook his head. "What a fool I sounded like just now. I'm sorry, Phillipa, and I appreciate what you're trying to do. But I can't allow my personal desires to influence my decision, because it's not only my life that is affected by it, but every rider on my back and each Horseman under my leadership."

"But you *are* allowing your emotions to guide you. Can't you see that?" She tightened her grip on his arm.

He turned and gently cupped her cheek. "Whatever I decide to do, you and our children will be taken care of."

"I'm not worried about that and aren't you getting ahead of yourself with the children? We're not even sure I'll be able to conceive."

"You will." He wrapped an arm around her waist and tugged her so close that her breasts flattened against his hard chest. The sensation sent a wave of desire crashing over her. "We'll make sure there are many chances to get you breeding."

She smiled. "I like the sound of that."

* * * * *

At the end of the week Phillipa and Luther returned to Hornview for the meeting with Susana. They planned to stay overnight so that Susana would be nearby to assist in case Luther experienced any dangerous reactions to the new herbs.

When Moor had built their home, he'd included an adjoining herbarium for Susana to prepare medicines. The herbarium also served as a small infirmary where villagers could come to receive aid. Susana still made daily house calls to those too sick or wounded to come to her, but the herbarium had done much to facilitate her duties.

Moor greeted Phillipa and Luther when they arrived.

"Come in. Have a seat." He gestured toward the table.

"Where's Jill?" Phillipa glanced around for the couple's daughter.

"Over at Inez's playing with Canyon. They'll be coming over here later while Inez accompanies Terra on an exercise flight."

"Hello," Susana said, stepping through the door from the herbarium. She carried a tray laden with several jars and vials.

"Thanks again for your help," Luther told her.

"It's my pleasure and my area of expertise," she replied. "How has the pond seed been working?"

"It takes longer every time and the effects don't last as long as they used to."

"I have several powders that can replace it." Susana set the tray on the table and sat. "The one I'd like to try first is made primarily from blue pebble. It's generally easier to take than pond seed and works just as well."

"I tried that several years back and it did nothing," Luther replied.

"All right. Then let's try Fernalia. It's the same family as blue pebble, but stronger."

Luther agreed and moments later he drank the powdery substance mixed with water. They waited intently for any reaction.

Luther chuckled. "I feel like a sideshow."

"Sorry, honey." Phillipa glanced away, as did Moor, but she couldn't keep her gaze from him long.

After moments passed, the group fell into comfortable conversation. Susana excused herself to do some work in the herbarium and when she returned nearly an hour later, Luther hadn't noticed any changes at all from the herb.

"Here's something else." Susan mixed another potion and handed the mug to Luther. "Raven eye. This one isn't used as often, because it's rather strong. If you can tolerate it, it's one of the best and longest lasting for your condition."

Luther emptied the contents of the mug and almost immediately broke into a drenching sweat.

"How do you feel?" Susana asked.

"A little nauseous," he replied.

"Are you going to be sick?" Moor stood and reached for a basin.

Luther shook his head slowly. He tried to stand, but sank back into the chair and closed his eyes. "Dizzy."

His pallor and the tightness in his jaw as he tried not to vomit worried Phillipa.

"It's all right," Susana said, moistening a cloth in a basin of water and bathing his face. "The nausea should pass in a few minutes. If it doesn't, I have another medicine that can help alleviate it."

"Don't tell me this is normal?" Phillipa said.

"No. It obviously doesn't agree with him."

"Scarcely noticed," Luther murmured, forcing a slight smile.

Phillipa wondered how he could still retain his sense of humor. When Susana dampened the cloth again, Phillipa extended her hand. "I can do that if you want."

Nodding, Susana allowed her to take over. Phillipa wiped Luther's forehead and neck with the cool cloth. Finally he stopped sweating so heavily and relaxed.

"Feeling better?" Phillipa asked.

He opened his eyes, held her gaze and nodded. "Yes. Thanks."

"I have a couple more herbs to try, but let's wait a few hours. I want to make sure the raven eye has worn off completely," Susana said, filling another mug with plain water. She placed it in front of Luther. "Drink every bit of this, but slowly."

Luther nodded and stood, apparently no longer dizzy. He tugged at the front of his sweat-drenched shirt.

"Here," Moor called and tossed him one of his linen shirts he'd taken from a chest at the foot of the bed.

"Thanks." Luther removed his shirt and pulled on Moor's.

Phillipa took the damp garment from him and draped it over the laundry rack that stood in front of a window across the room. Glancing out at the snowy field, she sighed. Usually she was calm and collected, but here she was worrying over Luther. He was in the care of one of the best healers around and would soon have a new treatment for his affliction.

She shook her head. If she was this worried about him now how would she feel if he actually did return to the Fighting Carriers? Of course she'd be proud of him, but she would also fear for his life. After all, her own father had died while on duty as a Fighting Carrier. But he had been far too old for active duty and should have retired years before. Though not a young Horseman, Luther was still in his prime. He was fit, strong and fast.

And he was willing to waste his gifts and bury his love for his duty because of the crippling effects of guilt and fear. He seemed so certain that what had happened to the Gathering Party was his fault, but she simply couldn't believe it. One needn't know Luther long to sense his integrity. And she knew from Terra's stories he was courageous and respected as a Fighting Carrier. Her brother didn't give compliments freely, so if he spoke highly of Luther, his words must be true.

If only she could convince Luther to see himself as others saw him. But how did they see him? Was he perhaps right about being partially to blame for what had happened to his Gathering Party? He'd said that he and his rider were the only survivors. She'd heard Luther's side of the story, but how did the rider who had been maimed in the incident recall the events?

Though she hated the idea of going to a person she'd never met and asking about a painful chapter of his life, she needed to find out what happened from the only other reliable source left.

"Phillipa?" Luther asked, coming to stand behind her. He placed his hands on her shoulders. "Are you all right, love?"

"Fine. How are you feeling?" She turned to him and gazed into his eyes, looking for any sign that he wasn't well.

"I'm much better." He gently cupped her chin and smiled. "Don't look so worried. I've had strange reactions to herbs before. Sometimes it happens."

"He's right," Susana reassured her. "Most of the herbs used for his particular problem are quite strong and difficult for many Horsemen to take. Don't worry, though. We'll find something that works for him."

Phillipa nodded, feeling a bit silly. He was the one suffering the physical symptoms and here they were trying to ease her mind.

Chapter Eight

The Rider's Account

Several hours later, Luther tested another herbal potion called moss smoke. To Phillipa's relief, it worked perfectly, causing him to sweat lightly almost right away and producing no uncomfortable reactions. A short time after he swallowed it, Susana asked him to go on a run and, if he felt ready, a flight to make certain the treatment did its job while he worked.

Luther undressed and shifted to his beast-half.

"Moor, go with him just to be safe," Susana said and her husband also shifted shape.

The women followed the Horsemen outside, where they galloped over the fields for several moments before ascending. Moor's dark brown coat and wings contrasted with Luther's cloudlike whiteness as they raced across the clear sky, rising higher and higher until they were merely specks in the distance.

"Damn those Horsemen." Susana shook her head. "They shouldn't go that far yet. What if Luther gets dizzy again?"

Concern shot through Phillipa and she gritted her teeth. "Remind me to yell at him when he comes down."

"Don't bother. It's futile to tell a Horseman what to do. Believe me, I know." Susana raised her eyes to the heavens. "Besides, if he feels good enough to fly that high, I'm sure he'll be all right. I'm just overly cautious by nature."

In spite of her friend's comforting words, Phillipa didn't feel better until Luther and Moor landed, both panting and their coats damp with sweat.

"That was fun," Moor said, his tail flicking over his hindquarters.

"You're a damn good flier," Luther said.

"I can hold my own," Moor admitted. In truth, he could more than hold his own. In his youth, Moor had won The King Montague's Flame, a world-famous endurance race. Not long ago, he'd come in second in that same race. Quite a feat, considering he had been about twice the age of the average competitor. "But you're another speed demon. Never thought I'd meet another Terra."

Luther looked pleased by the compliment.

"Now that you two have shown off for the day, why don't you cool down, then we can have something to eat?" Susana suggested.

"Hey!" Terra shouted. He, Inez and the children strolled down the path toward the house. "Were you two having an exercise flight? Damn, I wish I'd been here sooner."

"Speaking of the speed demon," Luther said in a teasing tone.

Terra and his family approached. Inez and Susana took the children inside while Terra joined the men who had begun walking themselves out after their flight.

"Terra!" Phillipa called to her brother. "Come here a second. I want to talk to you."

The tall, black-coated Horseman trotted toward her and stopped. "What is it?"

She glanced in Luther's direction, hoping he wasn't paying attention to her. Luckily, he was involved in conversation with Moor.

"Do you know the name of Luther's rider? The one who was injured during his last Gathering?"

"Yes. His name is Gordon. He's a good man. Worked with the Fighting Carriers for many of years. Rode me a couple of times."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"Last I heard, he and his wife settled in Gull Cape. Why?"

"Luther has it in his head that what happened to his last Gathering Party was his fault."

Terra's brow furrowed. "That's crazy. Luther is an experienced Fighting Carrier. He knows accidents happen. We all have them."

"I know, but did you ever lose your entire Gathering Party, Terra?" She held her brother's gaze.

He shook his head slowly. "No. I can't imagine what that must feel like. But he can't give up his career. If I believed he was the sort of Horseman who took unnecessary risks with the lives of others, I'd be the first to say good riddance to him, but that's not the case. He is one of the best Fighting Carriers in the organization. A top-notch instructor. A hard-working Carrier. I'd trust him with my life and would fly with him anytime. Do you want me to talk to him?"

"Not right now but maybe soon. Thank you." Phillipa placed a hand on her brother's shoulder. Though she knew he meant well, sometimes Terra's "talks", especially regarding something he was passionate about such as the Fighting Carriers, could turn into a fiery lecture.

Something told her that Luther wouldn't take kindly to being yelled at right now. If he didn't snap out of this depressed state regarding his career, however, she wouldn't hesitate to ask Terra to try to knock some sense into him. First, she needed to hear what happened during that fateful flight from another source. A source that had been hurt as much as, perhaps more than, Luther.

* * * * *

Three days later, Luther and Phillipa were back at her house. Luther had resumed helping with her messenger service and also worked on repairs around her home that she'd neglected due to her generally busy schedule.

That afternoon, while Luther mended the paddock fence, Terra arrived as Phillipa had asked him to during their visit to Hornview. After telling Luther that she needed to go to her brother's house to babysit Canyon for a couple of hours, she and Terra flew off.

In reality, they were headed for Gull Cape. Terra had agreed to fly her there so she could speak to Luther's former rider, Gordon.

"I feel badly lying to Luther about where I'm going today," Phillipa called to Terra, who sped across the sky.

"Maybe you shouldn't have."

"I need to find out what happened."

"I'd bet my wings it wasn't Luther's fault."

Phillipa agreed, yet she wanted to hear for herself, so she'd at least have a solid argument when she approached Luther about the mistake he was making by leaving the Fighting Carriers.

A short time later, they landed in front of the tailor shop owned by Gordon and his wife. They stepped inside where a small, slender man sat at a table sewing a shirt. One of his legs was amputated, his trousers knotted below the knee.

Upon seeing Terra, the man smiled, grasped a wooden cane and approached. "Terra! It's been a long time. How are you?"

"Very well, thanks, Gordon. And you?"

"Good. Very good. My wife and I have another baby on the way."

Terra chuckled. "That makes five now?"

"Six." Gordon's brown eyes sparkled.

"Congratulations. This is my sister, Phillipa. She's engaged to Luther."

"Ah." Gordon turned to her. "You're getting a good Horseman."

"I believe so," she said.

"So what brings the two of you to Gull Cape?"

"Actually, I came to talk to you about Luther," Phillipa said. "And...and to ask about what happened during the Gathering Party where you were both injured. If you don't want to talk about it, I understand, and I don't mean to stir up painful memories —"

"It's all right." Gordon's smile faded. "It hasn't been an easy adjustment, but I'm doing fine."

"I'm glad to hear it," Phillipa said.

"How is Luther? Last I heard, he was still in the care of healers. We hoped he'd make a full recovery."

"He's fine now. At least physically," Phillipa replied.

"I'll leave you two alone to talk," Terra said, heading for the door. "Phillipa, I'll be at the tavern when you're ready to go. Gordon, it's good to see you again."

"You too, Terra," Gordon said before the Horseman stepped out the door.

Gordon walked to the table where he'd been stitching a shirt and motioned for her to join him.

She sat and after a moment of awkward silence, Gordon said, "So how is Luther, really? When you said he's recovered physically, you didn't sound very convincing."

"He is physically recovered, but he's planning to resign from the Fighting Carriers."

Gordon shook his head. "That's a shame. He still has many good years left. I would have too, but—" He gestured toward his missing leg. "Not that I'm complaining. My wife and I have done well with this shop, but there are times when I still miss flying on Gatherings."

"Luther doesn't want to reenlist because he thinks he's no longer capable as a leader. He believes what happened to your Gathering Party was his fault."

Gordon's brow furrowed. "That's ridiculous. That storm came upon us so suddenly, there was nothing anyone could have done. It was a freak accident. Luther is the best Horseman I have ever ridden. If not for him, I'd be dead. He was the only Horseman who made it back to the village after that flight."

"I know," she said quietly.

"He carried two of us, you know." Gordon held her gaze. The emotion in the man's dark eyes touched her deeply. His respect for Luther was obvious.

"No. I didn't know that."

"What has he told you about that night?"

"Not much. Just that you and he were the only survivors and that he should have sensed the change in the weather and ended the Gathering sooner."

With a snort of humorless laughter, Gordon shook his head again. "It wasn't the sort of storm anyone could sense. Like most Horsemen, he tends to think he's a step below the gods. It's that damn Horseman arrogance. They're an admirable race, but—"

"Are conceited as hell?" Phillipa smiled slightly. "Being the daughter and sister of Horsemen, I know."

"I guess you do." Gordon chuckled, then his momentary burst of humor faded as he continued, "It happened suddenly. One moment we were flying through the normal rotten weather in the Spikelands, and the next we were surrounded by icy wind that was impossible to see through. Luther was in the lead, but it wouldn't have mattered who was up front. No one could see the direction in which we were flying. For a while, we tried to stay close to each other and even used support straps to keep contact. After so many hours, we knew we were flying in circles."

The tailor closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head. "I'm not sure exactly how long we were up there before Horsemen started dropping from sheer exhaustion. We couldn't even land for a rest because we couldn't see whether we were flying over land or sea. At first we started unloading cargo, then tack.

"When the first rider sent out a distress call that his Horseman could no longer carry him, Luther flew in and we took the rider on. That Horseman dropped into the ocean soon after. Others followed. Some took on two riders, but that kind of weight was enough to kill Horsemen who had been flying as long as we had been in such bad weather."

Phillipa's fists clenched and her entire body tensed just from imagining that horrible flight.

"Eventually, we lost contact with the others completely," Gordon said, his voice steady though his eyes shone with emotion. "You have to understand, Phillipa, that this storm was like a milder version of the Spikes. It was so cold that even the Horsemen's body heat couldn't keep us warm."

"Gods," Phillipa murmured.

"The other rider and I were slowly freezing to death. I don't know how Luther was still flying between the weather, our weight and the length of time he'd been in the air. He was bleeding from lung damage and was in terrible pain. I thought at any moment he was going to crash into the sea, but he kept going. We had used support straps to tie ourselves to his back, because the second rider had already lost consciousness and I was ready to fade out any second."

Her heart wrenching, Phillipa somehow remained calm. If Gordon had survived that flight and was able to talk about it, she could at least keep control of herself. The thought of any Horseman, especially Luther, suffering like that was unbearable, as was the pain endured by their riders.

"Eventually, I lost consciousness. The next thing I remember was waking up in the infirmary at Talor Valley. Somehow, Luther had made it through the storm and gotten us home. My leg had been removed because when he'd crashed on the Running Way, he'd landed on top of me.

"Thankfully, I was still unconscious and didn't remember anything about it. The other rider was dead on arrival. According to the healer, he'd been dead for a while." A pained look crossed the tailor's face and he sighed deeply. "Luther had carried the weight of a dead man. Two riders through that weather for all that time."

"I'm sorry to make you relive that," Phillipa said.

"You didn't. It's something I live with every day. It doesn't control my life anymore, thanks to the support of my family, but it will always be with me. Thanks to Luther, I'm able to be with my family. That night, he told us he'd get us home and he did. As you must know, Luther was in a very bad way. For days, the healers thought he was going to die and then they said he'd probably never be able to gallop or fly fast again, so I'm glad to know he's all right."

"Thank you, Gordon." Phillipa stood and extended her hand, which he shook. Then he rose, took his cane and escorted her to the door.

"Tell Luther he has nothing to feel guilty about," Gordon said. "Between you and me, I have never met a Horseman with more heart, determination and integrity. He is

what a Fighting Carrier should be and, if I was able to, I would fly with him on a Gathering anytime and anyplace."

Phillipa nodded. Though still shaken from his story, she felt overwhelming pride in her dream lover.

"Good luck to you, Gordon. And congratulations to you and your wife."

"Thank you. And let us know when you and Luther marry."

She smiled. "We'll deliver a wedding invitation personally."

After leaving the tailor shop, she walked to the tavern and met Terra, her thoughts still churning with Gordon's story.

"Phillipa, are you all right?" Terra asked when she took a seat beside him.

"I'm fine. You were right about Luther. It wasn't his fault."

"I told you."

"Now I've got to convince him."

"You will." Terra smiled. "Ever since you were a little girl, you've been very persuasive when you put your mind to it."

* * * * *

Terra brought Phillipa home and she asked him to stay for the midday meal. He said Inez and Canyon were waiting for him at home and flew off, waving to Luther, who pulled a load of firewood closer to the house for stacking.

Phillipa sighed, a feeling of dread in her belly. She knew coaxing Luther to talk about that fated Gathering Party probably wouldn't be easy, but it was long past time he faced the truth.

She strode toward him and fell into step beside him.

"Hello, love," he said, pausing for a moment to kiss her cheek before he continued toward the house.

"Hello," she said, trying to figure out the best way to introduce the subject.

She watched him unhitch himself from the wagon and begin stacking wood against the side of the house.

"Luther, we need to talk."

"All right." He dropped the armload of wood and turned to focus his full attention on her. "What is it?"

"I want to talk about your accident."

A slight, yet humorless, smile touched his lips. "You're persistent, aren't you? Phillipa, I have work to finish here and would rather discuss this at another time—"

"I've been to see your rider, Gordon. That's where I went today. I wasn't babysitting Canyon. I asked Terra to take me to speak with Gordon."

Luther's gaze held hers and he said softly, "I see."

"Will you please come inside and talk to me?"

"Why are you so bent on discussing the worst part of my life?"

"Because it not only affects you, but me too. I care about you, Luther. You're my dream lover. I can't just stand by and watch you make the biggest mistake of your life."

"And what mistake is that?"

"You know what it is. Leaving the Fighting Carriers to become a messenger or a private Carrier or to run an apple orchard."

"You'll be taken care of if I pursue any of those options —"

"I don't need to be taken care of! Not in that way. I need you, Luther. I want you, but as a whole Horseman. Not one cowed by fear. I've known you a short time, but it's still long enough to see you are not the kind of man accustomed to just giving up on anyone or anything, least of all yourself."

His jaw tightened visibly and he once again began stacking wood, this time with a vengeance.

"Phillipa, you don't know what it was like."

"No, I don't. But I do know you weren't to blame. Gordon had nothing but praise for you —"

"Praise! The man is a cripple because of what happened. Because I *fell* on him."

She folded her arms across her chest, torn between pity and annoyance. "From what he told me, it's a miracle that you didn't fall into the ocean, riders and all. Yes, riders, Luther. He said you carried two of them on a flight that nearly killed you. That *should* have killed you."

"Yes." He turned to her with such pain in his eyes that her throat constricted with unshed tears. "I should have died with the rest."

"And if you had, Gordon would be dead too. Is that what you would have preferred? That both of you went down with the others? Just because you were strong enough, courageous enough and lucky enough to survive gives you no right to feel *guilty*."

"If I had stopped the Gathering sooner —"

"You are a Fighting Carrier! You did what you are trained to do. Your entire party did what they were trained to do. They died serving our races and deserve our respect. By quitting the Fighting Carriers, you are not respecting them or yourself. You're hiding. If you wanted to retire because you were truly unhappy or bored with the work, I'd support you all the way, but that's not the truth. Is it, Luther?"

He glared at her, his eyes filled with anger that passed to utter sorrow. Moisture welled in them for several seconds, but he blinked it back and drew a deep breath, regaining control of himself.

More than anything, she wanted to reach out to him and offer comfort, but she couldn't. Not until he finally told her how he felt.

"No, it's not the truth," he said, his voice rough with emotion. "I love the work, but when I think about what happened..."

"Yes?"

"I'm afraid." The words were spoken with such distaste that she might have laughed if the situation wasn't so serious. To a Horseman like Luther, fear was not something he relished admitting to. Anything less than perfection was objectionable. That's what made him a great Fighting Carrier. Yet he was also a mortal being with the same needs, fears and desires as other men.

"I'm sure it's not the first time you've been afraid," she said. "With the things you face every day in your job, fear must be a part of life, but you've never allowed it to control you."

"I'd never lost an entire Gathering Party before. No one I know has *ever* lost an entire Gathering Party before."

"I'm sure you're not the first."

"No. There have been other cases of such storms coming up and wiping out Horsemen and riders, but that's something we only read about. It's not supposed to happen to us...to me."

"It wasn't your fault." She stepped closer and took his face in her hands, her gaze fixed on his. "You know that, right?"

His brow furrowed and he shook his head slightly.

"Luther, it was no one's fault. It was a storm. It happened. There was nothing you or anyone else could have done. You kept Gordon alive and you brought that second rider home so his family could have the comfort of a proper burial. You did your job and you did it exceptionally well."

"Don't patronize me."

"I'm not," she snapped. "I don't patronize anyone. Ever. Stop feeling sorry for yourself, damn it, and live your life. Gordon is. He's not the pitiful cripple you think he is. He has a thriving business and another child on the way. Why don't you go talk to him and find out for yourself? Maybe then you'll wake up and pull yourself together."

Frustrated beyond belief, Phillipa turned abruptly and stalked into the house, not so much as bothering to glance back at him.

A moment later, he stepped inside. His hooves clattered on the floor as he approached.

"You're right," he said. "I've been acting like a true-horse who's been spooked by a mouse. I don't know how that happened. I've never run from anything before, so I don't know why I started now."

Phillipa smiled slightly and took a step closer to him. She rested a hand on his full-coated chest and gazed into his elfin eyes. "You went through a terrible experience, Luther. The fact that you survived at all should be enough to prove your strength and

determination to put others before yourself. I can't think of many Horsemen who would have kept one rider on his back in that situation, let alone two."

"Fighting Carriers never leave a rider behind."

"Then you're going to reenlist?"

"I still have some leave time left but afterward there is a good chance that I will reenlist."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Well, that's a start."

"I love you, Phillipa."

His words took her aback. She hadn't expected a confession of love, at least not so soon. Even worse, she realized she loved him too.

As if not expecting a response, he turned and headed for the door. Gods, he knew her well, but not as well as he thought.

"I love you too, Luther," she called, her heart hammering in her chest.

He turned, a surprised, yet pleased, smile on his lips. Instead of stepping outside, he walked back toward her and paused a short distance away. With a shudder and a blur of white hair to human flesh, the floor trembled as he changed to Huform. When the momentary weakness that followed shapeshifting passed, he opened his eyes and stepped so close that she felt his breath on her lips.

"Show me how much," he said.

Without hesitation, Phillipa locked her arms around his neck and kissed him with all the love she felt.

Her fingers threaded through his hair and she closed her eyes, enjoying the moist, tender caress of his lips against hers.

Wrapping his arms around her waist, he tugged her so close that the warmth of his body seeped into her. His cock pressed against her, swelling as he deepened the kiss.

Phillipa's hands caressed his back, swept down his lean sides then cupped his buttocks. Gods he had a magnificent ass.

His hands slipped under her shirt and warmed her shoulders and back, then he slid them down her trousers and grasped her buttocks. He stroked and squeezed the spheres while his lips moved to her neck.

Lost in a haze of passion, Phillipa tilted her head to the side, allowing him easier access to her neck. He licked and kissed it, his motions both soothing and arousing.

"Gods, Luther, I love how you touch me," she breathed.

He gave a soft grunt of pleasure, grasped the back of her head and covered her mouth in an affectionate yet aggressive kiss that sent ripples of pleasure rolling through her from head to toe.

When the kiss broke, Phillipa hurriedly undressed while Luther turned down the bedcovers and sprawled on his back. She glanced at him, her heart thrumming with desire. All lean muscle, his body sent her lust soaring to dizzying heights. Gazing at her

with passion in his jewel blue eyes, he curled his fist around his thick cock rising from a nest of dark gold hair.

Phillipa straddled him and sat back on his thighs, her hand covering his as it stroked his shaft. He removed his hand, allowing her to completely control his pleasure. She relished the sensation of satin skin over hard muscle. Her thumb brushed across the ruddy head then she tore her gaze from his cock and looked into his eyes. If possible his expression had grown even more lustful and a sharp burst of desire in her lower belly sent her heart beating out of control. Her pussy clenched and her clit ached with need.

She rose to her knees and guided his cock head to her hot, wet pussy. His breathing deepened and eyes closed partway as she enveloped him completely. Gods he felt so wonderful inside her.

Instinctively Phillipa began rocking atop him. Though she wanted it to last a long time, she doubted she could wait. Not today.

Luther raised his hands so she could entwine her fingers with his. She gripped him hard, leaning upon his hands as she rode faster and harder.

"Oh Gods, Luther," she panted, already on the verge of climax.

Her pace quickened and his hips jerked upward, matching her frantic motions until the wonderful bursting sensation overcame her. Moaning, her hands squeezing his tightly, she rode the waves of climax.

Before the orgasm faded, he shifted their position and pressed her onto her back. One of his hands pinned both her wrists over her head and his hips drove into hers. He sped and slowed his rhythm, teasing her and rekindling her passion.

"Luther oh Luther," she gasped, her eyes closed, her body completely possessed by her gorgeous, masterful Horseman. "I love you. I love you so much."

"Gods, Phillipa, I love you," he spoke against her lips, his voice ragged with emotion. His thrusting quickened, driving her over the edge.

Phillipa came so hard the sensations were almost painful. In the midst of the strong pulsations, she felt him come, his muscles taut and chest heaving. When he finished, he collapsed atop her and they lay for several blissful moments, their hearts seeming to beat as one.

* * * * *

A couple of days later, Phillipa and Luther readied the house for dinner with their friends who had been so hospitable during their visit to Hornview. It was a perfect winter day with clear skies and the sun glittering on the snow. Melting icicles performed a bell-like song, a pleasant, rhythmic dripping that brought back memories of childhood.

"I love that sound," she said, pausing for a moment in washing off the tabletop. "When I was a girl, I used to sit by the window and listen to the ice melting and pretend I was the legendary winter faerie."

Luther smiled. "That's a nice memory. Each Unity Feast, my old nanny used to tell us stories of the winter faerie."

"Nanny, Luther?" She chuckled, shaking her head.

"Yes, I had a nanny. You don't think my mother would bother rearing her own children, do you?" he said with a hint of bitterness. "In our bloodline, it simply isn't done."

"At least you had a mother," Phillipa said softly. Hers had died when she was very young.

"In body only," he told her. "Sometimes, that can be worse. Knowing she was alive and well, but had no interest."

Phillipa held his gaze. "I'd never thought about it that way." She might have had only one parent, but she'd never felt unwanted. Her father had loved her and Terra, and though he was often away on Gatherings, he always made sure his children knew how much they meant to him.

"Gods, if we have children, I hope I never begin to act like my parents," he murmured.

"You seemed to get along better with your father," she ventured.

"Yes, but he also kept his distance. Emotional displays are not allowed in the Woodfield-Shire family. At least not in front of anyone, servants included. Life itself becomes like a performance so that, even in private, one forgets how to show what he truly feels. I think my father might have loved me in his own way. My mother only loves the idea of keeping the family name shining among the 'royal' bloodlines."

Phillipa's brow furrowed. "You know, I'm almost afraid to meet your family."

"Don't be." He approached and drew her into his arms, his gaze upon hers. "The lot of them aren't worth one of you."

He covered her mouth with a tender kiss. As always when he kissed her, wonderful sensations flooded her from head to toe. She slipped her arms around him and pressed closer to his hard, warm body. Luther's tongue stroked her and he cupped her buttocks, kneading while he deepened the kiss even more. He sucked on her tongue, then stroked it again before gently biting her lower lip.

"Gods." Phillipa tugged slightly away, her pulse racing with desire. "We need to stop. Our company will be arriving at any moment and —"

"And this house is as clean as it's ever been. The bread is in the oven and the stew is on the fire. We have time for a little..." His voice drifted off and he kissed her again, then swept her into his embrace.

"Luther!" she scolded, her arms around his neck. "We do *not* have time for this."

"Want to bet? Now be quiet and kiss me."

Unable to resist the flirtatious look in his elfin eyes, she followed his command. Closing her eyes, she kissed him. Her tongue slipped into his mouth, meeting his with long, slow caresses.

Luther placed her on her feet against the stone wall and turned her so that she faced it. Phillipa craned her neck to watch him over her shoulder.

"We can't mess up the bed before guests arrive," he said in a teasing tone while sliding down her trousers. He spread her legs as far as they could go with the trousers pooled around her ankles, then he tugged down his trousers enough to free his cock. Already it was thick and hard, ready to pleasure her. He wrapped his fist around it and stroked a few times.

Phillipa's heart soared. Knowing that their company could arrive at any time seemed to make this moment even more exciting.

"Hurry," she breathed.

"Just enjoy yourself," he told her, stepping closer. She felt his cock brush against her buttocks while he slid his hands beneath her billowy shirt, reached around and grasped her breasts.

"Oh Luther," she breathed, pressing her forehead against the cool stones. Lust shot through her with each tug of his fingers on her nipples and every gentle squeeze of his hands on her breasts.

While one hand continued toying with her breasts, the other slid down her side, over her hip and covered her soft mound. He kneaded for several seconds, then slipped a finger inside her pussy, which was now slick with passion.

"Mmm," he purred close to her ear. His wet fingertip circled her clit, sending little quivers of delight through her. Her pussy clenched and throbbed. Gods, she wanted him to thrust into her and give her release from this marvelous, yet frustrating, tension. "You're nice and wet. Do you still think we don't have enough time?"

"We have time," she panted. "Just do it, Luther. Please just fuck me. Now. Fast. If anyone knocks on the damn door, don't open it."

He chuckled, though by the steeliness of his cock still pressed against her, she knew he was as aroused as she was. "That would be rude, love."

"This is rude. Making me crazy. Teasing me against a stone wall. Oh Luther!" she cried as he stroked her clit faster, then slowed just before she slipped over the edge of passion.

With a grunt of combined humor and lust, he grasped her hips and tugged a bit. She braced her hands against the wall, her fingers gripping the stones, and thrust her bottom toward him.

She felt the tip of his cock push against her pussy lips. Slowly he filled her with his rock-hard erection. Panting, Phillipa tried not to squirm, but couldn't help it, especially when he began thrusting in a fast, steady rhythm that drove her back to the edge.

"Yes, oh yes. Don't stop. Please," she murmured, her entire body aflame.

His pace increased, his large, warm hands gripped her hips and he pounded into her. Phillipa's eyes closed tightly. Her face and neck heated and her nipples tingled in time with her buzzing clit.

"Ah, Luther! Gods," she cried, thrust headlong into one of the most intense climaxes she'd ever experienced.

A few more wild thrusts and Luther groaned as he came, his body surging against her. Slowly he withdrew from her drenched pussy and relaxed against her, trapping her between the wall and his warm body. His skin felt smooth in places and hair-roughened in others.

Finally he straightened, embraced her tightly and kissed the top of her head. Then he released her to hitch up his trousers.

Phillipa pulled her trousers up as well. She crossed the room and began washing her hands in a basin of water. Luther came to stand behind her, wrapping his arms around her so that they both could wash their hands. After scrubbing his, he stroked hers with his wet fingertips. He began kissing her ear and nibbling the lobe.

"Luther, really, we need to stop." She grinned, squirming a bit when he tickled her ear by blowing in it. "Luther!"

"All right." He stepped away, though the flirtatious gleam in his eyes enticed her.

She dried her hands on a towel and passed it to him so he could do the same.

"Dump that dirty water and get some fresh, will you?" she asked, nodding toward the basin.

"Your wish is my command." He bowed from the neck, a teasing smile on his lips.

"Somehow, I doubt that."

He disappeared outside and when he returned moments later with fresh water from the well, Terra, Inez, Zach, Sophia and their children followed behind him. Inez explained that Susana had to see a patient and she, Moor and Jill would be along a bit later.

While their friends sat around the table, Phillipa and Luther served tea. They exchanged a very intimate glance that no one else noticed. It seemed they had finished their tryst in just enough time. Any later, and their guests would have arrived before the climactic finish and left them too frustrated to enjoy the meal.

Chapter Nine

Back in the Saddle

After the meal ended and the dishes were cleaned, the adults talked while watching the children play. Eventually, Canyon asked to go outside and run in the snow.

"Not a bad idea." Moor stretched. "Walk off that meal."

"I'm more in the mood for a gallop and a flight," Terra said. "Anyone else?"

Moor groaned. "I know that look in your eyes. You want an exercise flight and I'm still in my slothful off-season mood. We'll be killing ourselves soon enough when Gathering season starts."

Terra glanced hopefully at Zach, who grinned and shook his head. "I'll fly, but I couldn't keep up with you, even if I wanted to."

"Then how about taking me for a ride?" Sophia asked.

"It would be my pleasure," Zach said, offering her his hand. "You'd better bundle up Twilight."

"We'll watch her," Inez said. "Go and enjoy your flight. Actually, we'll take all the children outside for a walk. It's a nice day."

Sophia and Susana bundled their children in their winter cloaks, then Zach and Sophia left the house, looking pleased to have some rare time to fly alone.

"No one wants a good stretch of the wings?" Terra glanced at Luther.

Phillipa knew by the gleam in his eyes that her mate felt like having an exercise flight as well. It was impossible for a Horseman like him not to want to fly with another who loved speed as much as he did.

"Why don't you go?" Phillipa suggested. "You've been stuck in all morning, helping me clean the house."

"Oh." Inez grinned. "Hang onto him, Phillipa. It's like pulling teeth to get Terra to do housework."

Terra's jaw dropped. "That is such a lie. I always help with the dinner dishes."

"Yes, you do." Inez nodded. "It's just the laundry, dusting, scrubbing floors and cooking that you avoid like the Spikes."

"I was rather good at changing diapers," Terra said weakly.

"Darling, Canyon is yard-trained now."

Terra glanced at Moor for help, but the older Horseman chuckled. "Don't look at me. Susana has me broken and trained."

"Excuse me?" This time, Susana looked stunned. "Moor, even slavers couldn't break you, so I certainly haven't. Not the way you constantly track your muddy hooves over my clean floor and –"

"Maybe I'll go on that flight after all." Moor stood and headed for the door.

"No you won't." Susana picked up Jill and thrust her into her father's arms. "Take her outside and the rest of us will be right behind you."

Moor glanced at the others with a smirk. "See what I mean. Broken and trained."

"Out!" Susana ordered, pointing to the door.

Phillipa shook her head and laughed softly. Luther stood and wrapped his arms around her from behind, kissing her cheek. "I think I'll go with Terra. We won't be long."

"Enjoy yourself."

"I will." He stepped away and drank moss smoke mixed with water.

"The moss smoke has been working well I gather?" Susana asked.

"Excellent. Much better than the pond seed," Luther told her.

"Let's go." Terra stood and headed for the door. "It's a perfect afternoon for a flight. Don't want to waste it."

The blond and the black-haired Horsemen quickly left the house.

A short time later everyone stood outside. Inez and Moor stood near the house while the children played in the snow. Susana and Phillipa walked along the paddock gate. In the distance Luther and Terra, now wearing their beast-halves and full-coats, warmed up for their flight with an easy canter over the field. They were both handsome creatures – sleekly muscled, one black as a raven's wing the other white as the snow on which they traveled.

Though Terra was taller than Luther, he didn't outshine him in any way. Luther carried himself with an elegance rare in most Horsemen, particularly ones of the Fighting Carrier variety. From the set of his man-shoulders to the way he carried his long, white tail high and proud he was the most gorgeous creature she had ever seen.

"Have you and Luther talked about a wedding date yet?" Susana asked.

"We're thinking of doing it before Gathering season starts in the spring."

"That's a beautiful time for a wedding."

Phillipa nodded as Susana continued talking. She hadn't meant to deliberately ignore her friend but her attention fixed on Luther and Terra who galloped across the field. Their wings tight to their sides, they raced so quickly their legs seemed to blur. Snow and chunks of dirt flew beneath their hooves. Terra leapt ahead for a second then Luther picked up speed, raced alongside him and managed to edge in front.

Terra apparently didn't like that and quickened his pace. Famous for his enormous strides, Terra had an advantage over the shorter, more compact Horseman. The fact that Luther matched him, shoulder to shoulder, was amazing in itself.

"What the hell are they doing?" Inez said, approaching Phillipa. She shook her head, her eyes narrowed.

"A pleasure run. Hah," Phillipa said sarcastically.

She should have known putting a couple of arrogant, speed-hungry Carriers together was a mistake.

"Why don't they at least get in the air," Inez muttered. "They're going to break their stupid legs on all this snow and ice."

"I hope not," Susana murmured.

With Twilight in one arm, Jill in the other and Canyon following behind him, Moor approached and said, "I don't think I've ever seen Terra go that fast."

Phillipa agreed and she had seen Terra race many times. Of course she'd never seen him *need* to go so fast before to keep with another Horseman. Usually he left his competition in his dust.

Competition! This was supposed to be a pleasure run between friends.

Seconds later, both Horsemen spread their wings and rose with blinding speed. They streaked across the sky, wing tip to wing tip, their legs churning in the cold winter air.

"They're circling the fields," Inez said, slightly annoyed. "Racing of all things. They must be mad."

"It's only in fun, Inez," Moor said, his face tilted skyward. He was clearly involved in the race.

"Fun?" Phillipa wrinkled her nose. "If they keep up that pace much longer they're going to kill themselves."

"I can't believe I'm actually seeing a Horseman duel with Terra for speed and manage to stay with him," Moor said.

"Neither can I," Inez admitted. Phillipa glanced at her, noting she looked as tense as Phillipa felt. Usually Terra easily outran other racers, especially over short distances. He'd only been beaten once by a young Horseman named Linn and even then Terra had been suffering from a sprained wing that hindered his flying.

Terra and Luther soon became tiny blurs in the distance before they turned back, still keeping their deadly pace.

Twice more they circled the fields surrounding Phillipa's home then with an almost supernatural burst of speed, Terra pulled in front of Luther by a head. After that they seemed to call a truce and slowed their flight. Finally they landed by the paddock.

Both breathed hard and streamed sweat. In the winter chill, steam rose from their powerful bodies. Dirt from their ground race streaked Luther's white coat and both Horsemen's long hair was disheveled from the race.

"Nice exercise flight," Moor called.

Smiling, Luther and Terra approached at a slow walk. Their eyes were rimmed with red from the lashing wind and distended veins stood out beneath their coats. Though obviously tired, neither had telltale wobbly legs, proving that they were indeed Fighting Carriers. Both wore rather cocky grins.

"Satisfied now?" Inez asked, her arms folded beneath her breasts. "After acting like a couple of colts?"

"You're still bloody fast," Luther said to Terra. "I haven't had that much fun in months."

"One thing is for sure, you have completely recovered," Terra told him. "Damn near flew me into the ground."

"Show-offs," Phillipa scolded.

Luther met her gaze, his elfin eyes wide in mock innocence. "We were just having fun."

"If I flew like that I'd be feeling it in the morning," Moor said.

"So will he." Inez jerked her head in Terra's direction.

"Don't tell me you're mad at me," Terra said. "It was just a pleasure flight."

She didn't reply but the look she flung him was more of arousal than anger.

"Want to walk with me while I cool down?" Terra wrapped an arm around her and tugged her closer for a kiss.

"Go on. We'll watch the children." Susana waved them away.

"What about you?" Luther stepped closer to Phillipa.

"What about me?"

"Want to walk with me?"

In truth the sight of his gorgeous, sweat-drenched body, the muscles taut from his flight, aroused her more than she wanted to admit.

She placed a hand on his heaving chest and stroked the damp full-coat. "I suppose I can force myself."

His smile broadened and he brushed her mouth with a kiss before taking her hand as they walked through the snow.

Glancing across the field toward Inez and Terra, Phillipa said, "I've never seen a Horseman keep up with Terra before."

"If anyone can inspire a Horseman to perform to the best of his ability, it's your brother."

"Terra is the best," she admitted, but looked up at him with pride. "So are you."

A smile flickered across his lips.

"I can understand why you became a Fighting Carrier. You were born for it. It's where your heart is."

"No. It's where my soul is," he said, pausing for a moment and cupping her chin in his hand. He gazed deeply into her eyes. "My heart is right here with you."

* * * * *

Over the following days, Phillipa noticed a change in Luther. When he wasn't helping her deliver messages or finishing repairs around the house, he trained with a vengeance. She didn't doubt he intended to reenlist in the Fighting Carriers when his leave time ended in a couple of months.

Though part of her worried for his safety, just as she'd always worried about Terra and her father, she knew he was meant to be a Fighting Carrier.

One morning after they'd turned her horses out to the paddock for some fresh air, they noticed Terra flying in. He landed nearby and jogged over.

"Luther, just the Horseman I came to see," Terra said. "We need you."

Luther's brow furrowed. "Who needs me?"

"Me and a village in the tropics called Whitewood Cove. They've lost several Carriers due to injury and even though it's the dead of winter reinforcements are spread thin. There's been much trouble in the tropics lately. I'm going to need another Horseman to switch off with me leading Gathering Parties."

"Terra—"

"I don't want to hear any excuses. After that exercise flight we took last week I know you're in the best condition of your life. You're a Fighting Carrier. Get over what happened and start acting like it before you regret—"

"I'll fly to the Hall of Fighting Carriers, take my test with one of their healers and meet you at Whitewood Cove."

Terra stared as if surprised by Luther's decision. "You're coming?"

"I just said so. You'll be all right while I'm gone?" Luther turned to Phillipa.

"Of course. I always was, even though I'll miss you." She slipped her arms around him and held him tightly for a moment. He returned the embrace and in spite of his outward calmness she sensed tension in him. Or perhaps it was excitement, as he seemed to have regained his confidence about returning to duty.

"Damn." Terra grinned. "I've waited years to lecture you and you didn't even give me the excuse to do it."

Luther shook his head. "Just get out of here. You have a village waiting for you. I'll meet you there as soon as the healer passes me."

Terra saluted then turned and galloped off. His wings spread and he ascended quickly.

Phillipa followed Luther to the house where he gathered his belongings.

"I'm not sure how long I'll be gone," he said.

"I understand. Be careful."

"I will."

They walked to the barn where he changed to his full-coated beast-half and she helped him with a quick brushing before he donned his tack.

When he was ready to go he took her in his arms and kissed her deeply.

"I'll miss you," she said, clinging to his waist and resting her cheek against his chest.

"I love you, Phillipa."

"I love you too."

He kissed her again then she followed him out of the barn. All too soon he ascended and flew in the direction of the Hall of Fighting Carriers.

Phillipa sighed, her stomach taut with nerves. She was glad he'd returned to duty but couldn't help worrying. Such was the life of a Fighting Carrier's wife.

Or soon to be wife, she reminded herself. She felt as if they were already married. Why had she ever been concerned with binding herself to him? He was the Horseman she loved. The one who shared her dreams and who had claimed her heart. When he returned she'd tell him that she definitely wanted to plan a spring wedding, perhaps even sooner.

As if sensing her mixed emotions, Black Silk whinnied and walked toward her. She sat on the fence, stroked his face and prayed for Luther and Terra's safety in the tropics.

* * * * *

Luther knew he'd have no problem passing the physical examination by the healer at the Hall of Fighting Carriers. Within hours of being declared fit to return to duty, he was on his way to the tropics to join Terra in Whitewood Cove. General Sota, leader of the Fighting Carriers, had summoned him for a brief meeting before he left.

Sota wished for Luther to reenlist then and there, but Luther decided to wait until the end of his leave time, which was his right. This volunteer assignment with Terra would give him the chance to decide if he truly was still fit to lead.

Though Luther's gut churned with anxiety, he felt more eager than frightened by the prospect of returning to duty. Already he felt the rush of leading a Gathering Party, of fighting the giant lizards that often attacked them while they dug for Rock Blood. Nothing compared to the excitement and challenge of being a Fighting Carrier.

After a few hours of flying, the frigid North gave way to warmer weather, then the almost suffocating heat of the South. Though he wasn't flying especially fast since he knew he needed to conserve energy for the grueling flights to come, by the time he was ready to land, sweat drenched his coat. The sweltering tropics made just about everyone uncomfortable, but to Horsemen, especially those from the North, they were particularly hellish.

Circling Whitewood Cove's Running Way, he took advantage of his sky view to look over the village. He spotted Terra's gleaming black coat amidst a group of Horsemen and he guessed they were in the middle of a briefing.

Immediately after landing, Luther joined them. Terra introduced him to the group of nine Carriers, only one of whom was also a Fighting Carrier, recently graduated and eager to work.

After adjourning the meeting, Terra walked with Luther to the tack house.

"That's all the Horsemen we have for now," Terra said. "Not much, considering this is a major Gathering village. I figure if the two of us take shifts, we can squeeze out a couple of Gatherings a day. Only a couple of those Carriers could handle more than one a day."

"Are we expecting any more reinforcements?"

"Hopefully within a day or two. There have been many accidents down here lately and much bad weather. Tropical storms have destroyed many of the coastal villages. That's where most of the able-bodied Horsemen are making repairs. I don't think we'll be here any longer than a week. Two at the most."

Nodding, Luther unloaded his tack into the private stall Terra guided him to.

"I'm glad you came." Terra offered his hand, which Luther clasped.

"So am I."

"I'll lead the first Gathering, since you just flew in and had to go through that damn test back at the Hall of Fighting Carriers."

"Thanks."

Terra nodded and left the stall.

With a sigh, Luther folded his arms across his chest and glanced around. A slight smile touched his lips. In many ways, it seemed like he'd never taken a leave at all. He felt jittery inside, which wasn't exactly unusual. He always felt that way, at least a bit, before each Gathering and that was good. It kept him sharp. Still, he needed to rid himself of the fear that he was no longer fit to lead a Gathering Party.

Once on the flight, he would feel differently. If he didn't, then his question about whether or not he belonged in service would be answered.

His thoughts drifted to Phillipa and he wondered what she was doing. Was she home or out on a delivery? If she was, he hoped she'd be careful. Though she was an experienced messenger, he hated to think of the dangers that could befall her, such as the accident she'd had in the forest where he'd rescued her.

He could hardly wait to be with her again, to hold her in his arms and make love with her. When he returned to her, hopefully it would be as the Fighting Carrier he had once been so that he would be a mate she could be proud of.

Someone tapped on his stall door and he bid them to enter.

A petite, though sleekly muscled, woman with smooth ebony skin and large amber eyes stepped into the stall. "Luther?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Janelle. I've been assigned as your rider while you're in Whitewood Cove." She extended her gloved hand which he shook, noting she had a firm handshake and she held his gaze. He took that as a good sign. One thing he had learned was not to trust anyone who refused to look him directly in the eye.

"Nice to meet you."

She nodded. "Do you have any questions?"

"How long have you been stationed here?"

"I came here two weeks ago, but I've been riding Horsemen almost all my life and have been a Gatherer for three years. I take my job very seriously, so you needn't worry because I'm a woman."

"Your gender means nothing to me," he said. "All that matters is that you do your job."

She raised an eyebrow. "I wish all Horsemen had that attitude. I've found that few judge a person by ability, but by whether or not they have a cock and balls."

"I have my own cock and balls, so whether or not my rider has them means little." He left the stall and held the door for her.

Stepping out, she asked, "And how long have you been a Carrier?"

"I've been a Fighting Carrier for eighteen years."

"Impressive," she said, not sounding all that impressed. This woman was trying too hard to prove herself in a man's world. A slight smile played around his lips. In a way, she reminded him of Phillipa. In spite of Janelle's attitude, he felt they would get along, providing she was a good rider who actually took her job as seriously as she claimed to.

"Who is your regular rider?" she asked.

"Do you know many riders from the North?"

"Some."

"Right now I'm waiting to be reassigned. My regular rider can no longer participate in Gatherings due to an injury."

"Was he injured on a Gathering?"

"Yes."

"How did it happen?"

Luther's jaw clenched. This wasn't the sort of conversation he had expected to have. Perhaps this was an omen that he shouldn't lead another Gathering? No. That was superstitious nonsense.

Still, she had asked a question and since she was trusting him with her life by riding him on this Gathering, she deserved to know the truth.

"He was injured during a landing accident."

"Your fault, then?" Janelle stared at him with accusing eyes.

"If you would prefer not to ride me, young lady, it's up to you." He glared. "I have never deliberately injured a rider."

"Then how did it happen?"

"We were caught in a mini Spike. My Gathering Party lost our way and my rider and I were lucky to step away with our lives."

Those shrewd amber eyes narrowed. "Was your rider called Gordon?"

"Yes."

For the first time since they met, a genuine smile touched her lips. "You're the Luther I thought you were, then. And I'll be pleased to ride you. According to Gordon, you have the gods on your wings. See you at tonight's Gathering Party."

Janelle walked away, leaving Luther to his thoughts. Apparently Phillipa hadn't been exaggerating when she said Gordon still trusted him. Now he needed to prove that trust was warranted.

For the next few hours, Luther familiarized himself with the village, particularly the storage houses where supplies of Rock Blood were kept and the longhouse where he and most of the other temporary residents slept.

As usual, the weather was uncomfortably hot. In order to maintain a semblance of normalcy, he'd be required to take regular doses of moss smoke. After a short rest, he returned to the Running Way in time to see Terra's Gathering Party land.

He approached to help them unload the harvest of Rock Blood.

"How was it?" he asked Terra, who was already unfastening the harness around his man-torso. Luther rolled off his black coat and his man-half gleamed with sweat.

In the tropics, Horsemen and humans alike needed to be careful of heat stroke and dehydration.

"Hot." Terra wrinkled his nose. "Hardly any lizard attacks, though."

"That's the only good thing about Gatherings out here," Luther said, unloading Terra's saddle packs. The tropical lizards didn't bother attacking nearly as much as Ice Lizards, probably due to the fact that food in the tropics was more plentiful than in the Spikelands.

Other than the intense weather and oceans filled with man-eating plants in both the tropics and the Spikelands, attacks by giant lizards and other vicious creatures made Gatherings dangerous. Still, Luther had to admit part of him enjoyed the excitement.

"Are you all set for tonight's flight?" Terra asked.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"At least the weather cools down a bit at night."

"Sure." Luther grinned. "Maybe we'll be lucky and it will drop to steaming instead of boiling."

Terra gave a snort of laughter. "I need to dump my tack and cool down. Talk to you later."

Luther brought Terra's cargo to the supply house, where the local healer waited to check it for quality.

Surprised that it felt good to once again participate in even the mundane tasks involved in the Gatherings, Luther realized he was looking forward to his flight more and more.

Sooner than he'd imagined, he was once again in midair, flying through the humid night with a Gathering Party behind him and a Gatherer astride him. Janelle was an excellent rider, from a purely businesslike standpoint. If he had a choice of women to carry, he would always desire Phillipa.

Unfortunately, even if she'd wanted to become a Gatherer, she was far too tall and big built. Carrying her on pleasure rides was one thing, but for Horsemen to carry cargo and a Gatherer on nonstop flights over hundreds of miles, the riders needed to be relatively short and lightweight.

"So talk to me, Luther," Janelle called partway through the flight. "It's a long ride. Are you married? Have any children?"

"I'm engaged. We're planning to be married in the spring."

"Ah, a spring wedding is always nice."

"How about you?"

"No husband. No children. It'll probably stay that way. Not many men want to marry a Gatherer. They think women should be home, barefoot and pregnant."

"That's not completely true. You know Terra?"

"The big stud with the black coat?"

Luther chuckled. "That's him. He's married to a Gatherer. She's his regular rider back in Hornview."

"Really? What about you? Do you expect your betrothed to stay home and wash your dirty hoof picks?"

This woman amused him, but he could see why she'd have trouble finding a mate. And people talked about Horsemen's attitudes.

"Phillipa is a messenger," he replied. "Usually far too busy to wash my dirty hoof picks."

Janelle snorted. "Maybe I should try moving up North. You Horsemen up there don't seem to mind if a woman has her freedom."

"I think it's more a matter of finding the right Horseman, than looking in a particular location."

When they finally landed in the steamy jungle where they harvested Rock Blood, all idle chatter ceased. The Gatherers and some of the Horsemen dug for the Rock Blood, while other Horsemen stood watch against possible attacks.

Luther thought they might get away without any problems from the giant lizards, when two slithered out of the trees and headed for the group, their ten-inch razor-sharp

fangs exposed and pronged tails lashing behind them. Luther leapt over one of the deadly tails. Using swords and hooves, he and the other Horsemen slashed and kicked until the monsters retreated.

"Almost finished?" Luther called to his party. "Once they attack, they'll be back again for another round."

"We're ready to load up," Janelle shouted.

Everyone moved quickly to load the Horsemen with cargo. Then they mounted and Luther led the way through the jungle to a clearing where they had just enough space to take off.

By the time they landed, Luther felt happier and more confident than he had in months. Circling the perimeter of the Running Way to cool down after his flight, he wished Phillipa was there. He longed to tell her about the Gathering and thank her for shaking some sense into him before he'd actually gone ahead and quit the Fighting Carriers.

* * * * *

Five days later, Terra and Luther headed back home. Luther had enjoyed getting back to work, but he could scarcely wait to see Phillipa. She was the one who had forced him to see reason and confront his fears. For that he would be forever grateful. It almost seemed as if the fates had brought them together for more than the dream sharing. In many ways she had saved his life. Though in body he had survived that tragic Gathering, his spirit had died and Phillipa, his beautiful dream lover, had resurrected it.

"Thirteen flights in five days," Terra said. The Horsemen flew side by side at an easy pace. After so many flights in the tropics, neither wished to test the other's speed, but were content to soar along enjoying each other's company. "It was as bad as the end of season rush. I'm bushed."

"Me too, but it felt good to get back into the routine. Not that I'd ever want to be stationed in the tropics permanently."

"I wonder where they'll put you, now that you have Phillipa? You know the Fighting Carriers do all they can to accommodate dream lovers."

"If they didn't, they'd lose too many Horsemen. I love being a Fighting Carrier, but if I ever had to choose between that and Phillipa, it would be no contest."

"That's how I feel about Inez. Maybe they'll send you to Penrose."

Luther agreed it was a likely possibility. Penrose was a smaller Gathering village than Hornview, but as far as he knew, it had no permanent Fighting Carrier stationed there and it was a fifteen-minute flight from Owlhill.

A short time later, Luther and Terra said goodbye and flew in opposite directions to their homes. Luther's heart pounded with excitement at the thought of seeing Phillipa again. Though they'd only been parted a short time, he missed her greatly.

Unfortunately, when he arrived home she wasn't there. The absence of Black Silk from the barn told him she was probably out delivering a message. Perhaps that was a good thing. Now he could surprise her with a romantic evening. He could almost taste her sweet lips and feel her body against his. His cock twitched just thinking about it.

He heated water and filled a tub for a bath, then washed thoroughly, scrubbing his hair with Phillipa's lemon-scented soap. By the look of the house, she'd been busy delivering messages. The room was cold, even to a Horseman. Clothes littered the furniture and dirty dishes cluttered the table. The bed hadn't been made, either.

He sighed. Phillipa was fantastic in bed and he loved her independent nature, but as a housekeeper she left much to be desired. He built a fire in the hearth, straightened up the room, washed the dishes and put the clothes in a laundry tub to soak. Then he tossed together a stew for dinner.

By then, the room had warmed enough for him to remove his clothes. Like most Horsemen, he enjoyed walking around naked, even in Huform. Propriety dictated otherwise, however, at least among humans. In all-Horseman places such as the Hall of Fighting Carriers they rarely wore clothing, except in severe weather.

The thud of a horse's hooves signaled Phillipa's arrival. Luther's pulse leapt and he smiled, eager to see her. He changed to his full-coated beast-half, opened the door and cantered down the path toward his lover and Black Silk.

"Luther!" Phillipa shouted, smiling broadly.

"Hello, love." He stopped beside Black Silk and pulled Phillipa off the horse's back and into his arms. His mouth covered hers in a hungry kiss that she returned with equal fervor.

Gods, she felt and tasted wonderful. She buried her gloved hands in his hair and uttered a sound of contentment.

When the kiss broke, she hugged his neck. "I missed you so much. How did the Gatherings go? I want to know everything that happened. When did you get back? The house is a mess. I've had so many deliveries these past few days that I scarcely had a chance to—"

"The Gatherings went beautifully. I got back a few hours ago and the house is clean. Dinner is cooking. Would you like me to fill a bath for you?"

Her brow furrowed in mock anger. "Are you trying to tell me I stink?"

"Not at all. I just thought you might enjoy—"

She kissed him again, her tongue stroking his tenderly.

"I would enjoy a bath. Just let me get Black Silk settled."

Reluctantly, Luther placed her on her feet and she took the horse's reins as they walked him to the barn. He helped her remove the tack, then while she groomed the horse, he went to prepare her bath.

Chapter Ten

Trouble at Lawton Orchards

Phillipa's stomach fluttered with happiness and anticipation. She'd just settled Black Silk in the barn and headed toward the house. Snow crunched beneath her feet and the chill in the air had become worse since dusk fell, but she knew she'd have a warm, wonderful night wrapped in the arms of her Horseman.

She stepped into the house and drew a deep breath of pleasure. The fire in the hearth warmed the room and the delicious scent of stew filled the air. However, the visual pleasure outshone all else. Luther, his long pale hair loose down his back, squatted naked by the fire, prodding the burning logs with a poker. He stood, placed the poker aside and turned to her. His enormous blue eyes glimmered with lust and a teasing smile graced his lips.

"Well," she said, her heart fluttering as he walked toward her. "This is just what a woman likes to come home to. Dinner, a bath and an absolutely—" He silenced her with a kiss.

His steely arm wrapped around her waist and he buried his other hand in her hair. Phillipa's eyes closed and she moaned softly, absorbed in the gentle motion of his lips and the slow, tender thrusting of his tongue against hers.

"An absolutely gorgeous Horseman," she breathed once the kiss broke. He continued holding her and kissing her neck. She tugged off her gloves and dropped them to the floor so she could run her fingers through his silky hair. Relishing their closeness, she arched her body nearer to his.

He parted her cloak and slid his hands beneath her shirt.

"Gods, I've missed you," he said and cupped one of her breasts. His thumb brushed across the nipple, making it harden to a tingling peak.

"Oh Luther, I've missed you too. I just—"

Again he kissed her, while at the same time pushing off her cloak and loosening the belt on her trousers.

He stepped back only to tug off her shirt. Once she stood half naked before him, her full breasts begging for his touch, he caressed every inch of her torso. His warm hands sent little thrills of delight through her. She relished the sensation of his callused palms on her skin and his long, graceful fingers gently pinching and stroking her nipples.

"I could look at you all night. Touch you all night," he said, leaning closer and kissing the soft flesh behind her ear. The tip of his tongue teased the same spot before he nibbled her earlobe and licked her neck. He covered her shoulder with tender, biting kisses, never painful, yet with the perfect pressure to arouse her completely.

Phillipa's heart pounded and her clit ached with need. Her pussy felt hot and drenched with desire. His thick cock would slide into her so easily and he'd thrust hard, his magnificent body driving her to the edge of passion and then –

"Gods, I can't wait any longer," he said.

"I don't want to wait," she panted, kicking off her boots.

She was about to remove her trousers, but he grasped her firmly and tugged her toward the hearth. The lustful expression in his eyes sent a new rush of desire through her. She squirmed in an attempt to satisfy the hot, throbbing ache between her legs.

Luther chuckled, an enticing, masculine sound from deep in his chest. "Come here, you gorgeous wench."

He dragged her closer, pulled off her trousers and flung them aside. Without prelude, he stretched out on the floor, hauled her legs over his shoulders and kissed her inner thighs. His wet tongue traced shapes over her flesh and she quivered with need.

"Luther, oh please."

"Umm," he growled, unable to form words because his mouth covered her clit. He lapped and sucked the swollen nub.

"That feels so good," she murmured, thrusting her hips against him.

He stopped lapping her clit to thrust his tongue into her pussy. He explored her thoroughly, licking while his hands kneaded her buttocks. Phillipa's pulse raced out of control. Heat rose in her face and neck. Every pulse point throbbed to the rhythm of his thrusting tongue.

Then he turned his attention back to her clit. Using the tip of his tongue, he licked with upward strokes that drove her wild with desire. He played with her, slowing down or stopping the delightful torture when he sensed she was about to leap over the edge of passion.

"Gods, Luther, I can't stand it. I want to come. If you don't hurry I'm going to," she gasped. By now her body was so tense with lust, teetering on the verge of climax, that she could no longer control herself.

He laughed, a wickedly arousing sound that made her belly clench even more. That motion alone nearly hurled her into bliss. Not that she needed to wait much longer.

Luther began licking her in a fast, steady rhythm. Phillipa trembled from head to toe as she quickly neared her peak, but Luther grasped her buttocks and held her hips steady. His relentless licking flung her headlong into a breath-stealing orgasm.

Before she had a chance to completely recover, he sat up, knelt between her legs and filled her with his cock.

"Oh heavens," she panted, gazing at him through half-closed eyes. She couldn't keep from staring at the gorgeous Horseman claiming her body with strong, fast thrusts of his hips. The muscles of his broad shoulders and powerful chest bunched and tightened as he drove her toward another climax. His fierce expression and the way his elfin eyes grew dark with passion aroused her to unimagined heights.

"Phillipa," he gasped, his eyes closing momentarily before he forced them open to stare at her. She knew by the tension in his face, the flush of his chest and the tightening of his steely muscles that he was on the verge of release. Still, he held back, waiting for her to join him in ecstasy.

He removed a hand from her bottom and rolled his thumb over her clit. Phillipa exploded. Her eyes closed tightly and her body arched. Wave after wave of orgasm washed over her and, somewhere in the haze of pleasure, she felt him come. He lunged into her, every muscle tight and straining as his cry of pleasure filled her ears.

She lay, a smile on her lips, and recovered. He stretched out beside her and pulled her into his arms. For several moments, they remained there, then he stood and offered her a hand up.

"Your bath is ready," he said. "Care to share it?"

"Definitely." She tugged him toward the tub of warm, rose-scented water and they stepped in.

Phillipa reached for a cake of soap and straddled Luther, who sat with his broad back resting against the edge of the tub. She lathered her hands. "Close your eyes."

He did as she asked and she took a moment to admire his handsome features—a high forehead, wide set eyes with thick, ash blond lashes, wickedly arched eyebrows and a square jaw. After placing the soap aside, she rubbed the lather over his face. Her fingertips gently stroked his eyelids and she ran the tip of her finger down the length of his nose, noting the faint, almost imperceptible splash of freckles across it. She reached for a washcloth, dipped it in the water and rinsed his face.

Luther opened his eyes and smiled at her, his intent gaze upon her as she ran the soap over his neck, shoulders and chest. She relished touching him, exploring every bit of flesh. She loved the sensation of his curly blond chest hair against her hands and the smoothness of the skin on his shoulders and upper arms. A bit of hair covered his sinewy forearms.

Raising one of his hands to her lips, she kissed the back of it, noting the prominent veins and muscles developed from years of wielding a sword and loading and unloading cargo. Those hands had known much work, yet were still beautiful, the fingers long and well-shaped, the nails short and clean. She caressed the callused palm, then washed his fingers, massaging them gently before she moved to his other hand.

"That feels so good," he murmured, his eyes slipping shut. "Your turn next."

"Looking forward to it." She kissed his lips. He took her face in his hands and thrust his tongue into her mouth. Phillipa moaned softly and tightened her knees on his sides.

Taking the soap from her, Luther broke the kiss and gently pushed her back so he could soap her breasts. Those warm, wet hands, lathered with soap, slid over the soft mounds. When he rolled her nipples between his thumb and forefinger, desire shot through Phillipa. He dropped the soap and bent, taking one of her nipples into his mouth and sucking deeply.

"Ah!" Phillipa cried, her heart pounding with rekindled desire.

He lifted her breasts and ran his tongue from one nipple across to the other and back again, then began sucking and licking one.

Phillipa's entire body tensed and she felt the beginnings of another orgasm. Moaning with need, she arched her back and thrust her breast deeper into his teasing mouth while at the same time rubbing her pelvis against his swollen cock.

"Luther, I'm going to come again," she panted. "Unless...you...stop."

He growled and sucked harder.

Phillipa's hips ground against his and her orgasm struck fast and hard. She moaned and cried his name over and over, clinging to him, her body pulsing. He'd stopped sucking her breast and held her snugly to his chest as she sagged against him, her eyes closed and her head resting against his shoulder.

Finally she lifted her head and smiled. "That was wonderful."

"It sounded that way."

"Luther!"

A teasing expression in his eyes, he reached for the soap and handed it to her. They washed quickly and rinsed, then he pulled her between his legs where she sat, her head resting against his chest.

Content in their closeness, she sighed and stroked his hands, which rested atop her stomach. She turned slightly and glanced at him. With his eyes closed, he looked completely relaxed. Gods, he was adorable. She moved enough to stroke his cheek and his eyes opened partway, a smile tugging at his lips.

Turning and straddling him, she wove her fingers through his damp hair.

"Tell me how the Gatherings went. How was your rider?"

"She worked out very well."

His reply took her aback. Why had she assumed his rider would be male? "*She?*"

Luther's eyes opened fully and fixed upon her. "Yes. *She.*"

Trying to appear nonchalant, Phillipa asked, "What was she like?"

"Efficient. Skilled. Not afraid to do her job."

"Was she young?"

"Twenty."

Why was she overreacting to this? It was to be expected that, as a Fighting Carrier, he sometimes worked with women. There were female grooms—not that she expected him to use one of them unless he had no other choice—female riders and healers. Maybe because she knew how intimate their rides together were, but the thought of another woman on his back, even for business only, made her a bit jealous.

"Was she pretty?"

"Pretty?"

"Yes, Luther. You know," she said with a trace of sarcasm.

"I suppose some men would consider her attractive."

Phillipa forced a smile. "But not you?"

She stood, reached for a towel and wrapped it around her. For some reason, she didn't want to have this conversation with him while they lounged naked in a tub. She walked to the bed and sat.

"Phillipa, what are you hinting at?" He also stood, took a towel and quickly dried off. She watched the play of muscles in his perfectly proportioned body, recalled how gorgeous he was even with his beast-half. Most women would love to sit astride such a beautiful, powerful creature.

"I'm not hinting at anything. I'm just curious to know how everything went for you."

"It went fine."

"I'm sure it did, with you flying around the tropics with a twenty-year-old nymph on your back." She snorted and moved away when he sat beside her.

"Who said anything about Janelle being a nymph?" he demanded, his brow furrowed.

"You already said she was pretty."

He grinned and edged closer. "Are you jealous?"

"No, I'm not jealous. I'm curious. There's a difference."

"Phillipa, why would I notice a pretty woman when I have a beauty at home?"

"You're spreading the fertilizer pretty thick today, aren't you, Luther?"

Rather than give a verbal retort, he grasped her waist, thrust her onto her back and covered her body with his, a forearm braced on either side of her head. Then he kissed her.

Damn he could almost make her forget anything with his kisses. They completely intoxicated her.

Of course, she was being silly. She and Luther were dream lovers. They belonged together and cared about each other. He would no sooner leave her for a rider than she would leave him for another messenger.

"I love you, Phillipa," he said. "It's not as if I have much choice as to who rides me. As a temporary Carrier, I had to take whomever was available and approved by the Fighting Carriers."

"I know. I just... I don't want you to forget me when you're off on Gatherings."

His gaze held hers with enough intensity to make her temperature rise. "That could never happen."

She locked her arms around his neck and pulled herself upward for a kiss.

Their bodies and lips pressed close together, Luther rolled onto his back. With a sigh of contentment, Phillipa closed her eyes and kissed his neck, relishing such a peaceful, intimate moment.

"Phillipa, do you still want a spring wedding?"

"It would be nice."

"I'm not sure I want to wait that long."

A giddy feeling swept over her. "Neither do I."

"How about next week?"

She laughed and kissed him. "As much as I'd love it, I would like to plan some kind of celebration and make sure there's enough time for our friends and family to be there."

"Two weeks, then?"

"Three. That will leave us enough time to plan a decent celebration. We can write out the invitations tomorrow and deliver them ourselves."

"All right."

Phillipa smiled and kissed him again. "I can hardly wait."

* * * * *

Less than four days later, Phillipa and Luther had set a date for the wedding. Their close friends and family had accepted their invitation and the ceremony would take place in three weeks.

That meant they had little time to plan. They hired Sophia, who was a seamstress, to make Phillipa's dress. Inez and Terra offered to help them arrange for the meal. They decided to marry in Hornview, since it was a central location for most of their guests and had a roomier longhouse than the one at Owlhill. The Chieftain of Hornview had readily agreed to perform the ceremony.

Luther and Phillipa were busier than ever between her messenger service and the wedding plans, but they were too happy to care. Two weeks before the wedding, he was once again summoned away, this time not by the Fighting Carriers, but by his family.

He and Phillipa stood outside exercising the horses when a full-coated blood bay Horseman flew in for a landing outside the paddock. His glossy black human hair was bound at his nape and he had a stripe of black fur down the length of his nose. Phillipa noted he was rather striking—not nearly as gorgeous as Luther, but still a handsome stallion.

"Wilder," Luther called and waved.

The Horseman returned the gesture and waited while Luther cantered to the fence, Phillipa astride Black Silk behind him.

"Didn't think I'd see you again until the wedding," Luther said with a smile.

Phillipa remembered that Wilder was a friend whom Luther had invited to their wedding while she'd been away on a delivery. She'd been looking forward to meeting him, since he was one of Luther's childhood companions.

"Luther, a message arrived for you this morning at the Hall of Fighting Carriers." Wilder withdrew a slip of parchment from the pouch around his neck. "It came from Lawton Orchards and the messenger who delivered it said it was of the utmost urgency. He was rather tired from the flight, so instead of having you wait until he recovered, I delivered it myself."

"Thank you," Luther said, breaking the seal on the letter and reading it quickly.

"Bad news?" Phillipa asked.

"Hard to say," he replied. "Wilder, this is my fiancée, Phillipa. Phillipa, Wilder is a good friend and one of the best Fighting Carriers you'll ever know."

"Pleased to meet you. Luther has told me much about you." Phillipa extended her hand, which Wilder took in his and bowed over it in a gallant manner.

"The pleasure is mine and don't believe all Luther's lies," Wilder said, his expression teasing.

"Actually, he had nothing but good things to say about you."

"Really? In that case, believe everything he said." Wilder still held her hand in his gentle grip.

"Give her hand back, Wilder," Luther said, though he had appeared to be rereading his letter.

With a wry grin, Wilder released her.

"Would you like to come in the house?" Luther asked.

"As much as I would enjoy a visit, I must be getting back to the Hall of Fighting Carriers. I have a class this evening and it wouldn't look good for the instructor to be late."

"At least teaching classes has probably kept you from being sent to the tropics this winter," Luther said.

"So far, but I will be taking my graduating class there before their final test. They can use the practice and the villages in the tropics can use the help. It's been a bad season for them as far as injuries among Carriers and such."

"I know. I just returned from there a few days ago."

"I'm glad to hear you'll be reenlisting in the spring."

Luther cocked an eyebrow. "Word travels fast, doesn't it?"

Wilder gave a snort of laughter. "I really have to be going. Goodbye, Luther. Phillipa, it was a pleasure."

He turned from the paddock and ascended.

"What a nice Horseman," Phillipa commented.

"You think so?"

"Well, don't you? You said he's your friend."

"But you look a bit too friendly when you talk about him."

"Don't be silly. I—" Phillipa grinned, a realization striking her. "Luther, are you jealous? You talk about me with Janelle, but—"

"I am not jealous. It's just that I've known Wilder long enough to have seen him turn on the charm with women. And he's a decent looking Horseman. Not that I'm one to notice other stallions, but when the woman I love gives a Horseman such looks as you gave him—"

"I didn't look at him in any particular way. Why would I? I have the most handsome Horseman to ever soar the skies."

She had spoken the total truth. Luther was the most gorgeous Horseman she'd ever seen, yet it amused her that he appeared to enjoy her compliments.

In spite of his obvious pleasure, he said, "Now who's, as you said, spreading the fertilizer rather thick?"

"What was the urgent message?"

He handed it to her. "It's from my mother. She says my brother needs help with the family business. She's practically begging me to come home. I'm having trouble believing she actually wrote it. When I left, she swore the only way she'd ever speak to me again was if I came crawling back and agreed to her terms about taking my 'rightful' place in the Woodfield-Shire line."

Reading the message, Phillipa could scarcely believe it was from a mother to her son. Though formal and businesslike, it did include a plea for him to return. By the tone of the letter, it seemed her only concern was with Lawton Orchards and that plea in itself was laden with guilt and demands.

She hadn't even inquired about his health and Phillipa knew she hadn't bothered visiting him or sending a message during the time he'd been recovering from his near-fatal injuries. His brother had come to see him once and his sister had stayed for a couple of weeks to help care for him when he'd been too ill to do much for himself.

Nor had his mother mentioned the wedding at all, though Luther had grudgingly sent an invitation, which she had ignored. Rather than hand-deliver the invitations to Lawton Orchards, Luther had insisted upon using another messenger service.

"It's strange that your sister and brother didn't mention anything about the problems with Lawton Orchards when they accepted our wedding invitation. Am I right in assuming you'll be going home?"

He shrugged. "The letter did pique my curiosity."

"When will you be leaving?"

"If you prefer I didn't go—"

"I'm just asking, so I can find someone to cover the messenger service while we're gone and see if my neighbor's daughter will look after my horses again."

Whenever Phillipa left Owlhill, she paid her neighbor's daughter to care for her horses. The girl was trustworthy and loved animals. She often visited Phillipa so she could ride the horses, since her family couldn't afford one for her.

His lips flickered upward in a slight smile. "You're going with me?"

"Of course I am." How could he have thought otherwise? She knew how uncomfortable Lawton Orchards made him and she would never send him to face it alone. Yes he was a powerful, courageous Fighting Carrier, but he was still her mate and she wanted to back him in any way she could. "You did say you'd bring me to Lawton Orchards one day. Looks like now is the perfect time."

"Or maybe not. I don't think there will ever be a perfect time for you to meet my mother."

After reading her letter, Phillipa couldn't argue. In spite of her vow to support him, she was apprehensive about the visit. She was a common woman and the Woodfield-Shires were—

Not going to intimidate her, no matter what.

* * * * *

As they neared Lawton Orchards, Phillipa sensed tension in Luther. Until then, his flight had been fairly relaxed. Now his muscles tightened as if he was about to face an Ice Lizard in combat.

In an attempt to soothe him, she caressed his man-back in gentle circles, his full-coat thick beneath her gloved hand.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yes. I'm not looking forward to this."

"I can tell."

He glanced over his shoulder at her. "I'm glad you're with me."

They fell silent for several moments and Phillipa glanced at the view below. The thick forest they flew over gave way to fields covered with apple trees, bare in the winter snow.

"Is this it?" Phillipa asked.

"Actually, we've been flying over my family's land for several miles now but yes, this is the orchard."

"It's beautiful."

"When I was a boy, I'd spend as many hours as I could out here as far away from the manor as possible. There was a sense of freedom out here. Wilder's father was an overseer here and when we were children, we used to help him with the harvest. Of course, when my mother found out, she wanted to put an immediate stop to it.

"My father didn't relish the idea of me mingling with our help, but he thought work built character. And since he intended for me to take over the family business, he

wanted me to learn as much about running the orchard as possible, so he allowed me to spend time in the fields. Limited, of course."

The longer she talked to Luther, the more she understood why he had left home at an early age to join the Fighting Carriers. The life his family had tried to impose upon him was far too restrictive for a Horseman with his spirit.

"You and Wilder joined the Fighting Carriers at the same time?"

"Left Lawton Orchards when we were seventeen. His family still lived here until recently. That's the workers' quarters down there." He pointed to several cottages. Smoke rose from the chimneys. Outside, several full-coated Horsemen chopped wood while a group of children played in the snow. It looked much like a small village.

Beyond the workers' quarters stood a large barn and several vast storage houses.

"There's the manor ahead." Luther pointed toward an enormous stone mansion. "Gods, this flight went by fast."

Phillipa's heart fluttered and her mouth went dry. At that moment, it fully struck her that she was engaged to a Horseman from a royal bloodline. She realized she'd be far more comfortable mingling in the workers' quarters than stepping into that stone fortress.

"We'll land and get settled, then I'll give you a tour of the rest of the grounds."

"You mean there's more?" she muttered.

"Quite a bit more. Are you all right, love? You tensed up on me."

"Sorry." She tried to relax, knowing that carrying a tense rider could be uncomfortable.

"Thanks for coming with me."

"Wouldn't miss it."

"You sweet liar." He chuckled and began circling for a landing.

All too soon his hooves touched the ground and Phillipa dismounted. He'd flown at a slow pace and required no time to cool down, yet neither was eager to step into the manor, so they walked for a few moments. The door opened and a slender blond woman of medium height stepped out. Her long hair bound at her nape, she wore an impeccable white shirt, breeches and boots beneath a cashmere cloak.

"Luther!" she called with a broad smile and hurried toward them.

When she reached them, Phillipa noted she had large blue eyes with the corners tilted up similar to Luther's. She also had pointed Horseman-like ears.

"Leticia." Luther smiled and returned her tight embrace.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, stepping slightly back, though she still rested her hands on his shoulders. "You look wonderful."

"I feel wonderful. This is most of the reason why." Luther grasped Phillipa's hand and tugged her close to his side. "This is Phillipa. Phillipa, my sister Leticia."

Leticia extended her hand to Phillipa, who shook it, noting Leticia had a firm grasp and a welcoming look in her eyes.

"I'm so pleased to finally meet you," Leticia said. "Welcome to Lawton Orchards."

"Thank you," Phillipa replied. She didn't generally take to people right away, but she immediately liked Leticia. Some of the discomfort she'd felt about visiting Luther's family dissipated. Still, she knew better than to relax too much. She had yet to meet Luther's mother and brother.

"Please come inside," Leticia said. "It's cold out here. Niles is already awaiting you and has ordered tea prepared."

"Niles is the butler," Luther told Phillipa, then turned back to his sister. "Were you going riding?"

"Yes. I'm to meet Basil Norwood-Perry within the hour. He's asked me to ride him in the Winter Classics."

"Leticia is one of the most sought-after riders in these parts," Luther explained with a hint of pride. "How long have you been riding Basil?"

"Since mid-autumn. His regular rider moved to the tropics after she married."

Though Phillipa wasn't very familiar with the Classics Competitions, she did know a majority of the riders were females of Horseman blood. Since old bloodlines dominated the Classics, fully human riders were rarely accepted.

"I really must be going, but I shan't be too long," Leticia said. "I feel terrible running off like this, but Basil and I really can't afford to miss a day of practice."

"We understand," Luther said.

"It was nice meeting you," Phillipa told her.

Leticia smiled. "You, as well. I look forward to talking more over dinner tonight."

"Is Mother in?" Luther asked.

Leticia's smile faded and she raised her eyes to the heavens. "Yes. Waiting to see you, actually."

Lowering his voice, Luther said, "Be honest with me, Leticia. What's wrong around here that she practically demanded my return?"

For the first time, Leticia looked uncomfortable. She took a step closer, her gaze darting from Luther to Phillipa. "It's Linton. He's made a damn mess of the entire estate."

Linton. Another "L" name. Luther had warned Phillipa that it was the custom of many royal families to select first names that begin with the same letter. *Just another purist quirk*, he'd said.

"What sort of mess?" Luther asked.

"He's in such debt from squandering money on women, liquor and gambling that he's cut the staff's pay almost in half and has begun selling off several of our acres."

Luther's brow furrowed. "Not the orchard?"

"No. Not yet. Just the open fields, but Mother is furious."

"For once I actually can't blame her. Where is Linton?"

"Flew off yesterday afternoon and still hasn't come home. But that's not unusual for him lately. We're lucky you even bothered to come home after how the family has treated you. That's what I told Mother when I found out she had the nerve to send for you."

"You should have come to me sooner."

Leticia shook her head. "I'd never ask that of you. Not after all that's happened between you and the family in the past. To tell the truth, I'm not sure if there's much you'll be able to do."

"Surely things aren't that bad?"

"Do you think Mother would have written to you if they weren't?"

Luther cocked an eyebrow. "That's true. I'm not exactly her favorite son."

"Let's be honest, Luther, she's been terrible to you. She'd be the same toward me if I hadn't learned to play the game so well."

"Game?" Phillipa asked.

"Yes. The game where we all pretend to be superior and bloodlines are more important than life itself." Leticia's voice dripped sarcasm. "I don't have your courage, Luther. Never did. I actually want my share of the family fortune."

Luther smiled slightly. "I don't blame you. You've certainly earned it, putting up with Mother all these years."

"Well, I really must be going. Basil hates it if I'm late. Sorry to pull out the skeletons in the closet in front of you, Phillipa, but there was really no way to hide it, now that you're here."

"It's all right," Phillipa replied. "All families have their skeletons."

Once Leticia had gone, Luther glanced at the house, then back to Phillipa. He offered her his arm. "Shall we?"

Chapter Eleven

Lavinia Woodfield-Shire

Luther and Phillipa paused by the large double doors at the front entrance to the manor. Using a brass knocker in the shape of an eagle head, he tapped twice in quick succession. Within seconds, a tall, slim man with steel gray hair bound at his nape opened the door. His flexible pointed ears and large, wide set eyes revealed his Horseman nature, though he was in Huform. Dressed in a simple black tunic and breeches typical of servants in wealthy homes, he carried himself with an almost regal air.

"Lord Luther." He bowed from the neck, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his solemn mouth. "How good to see you again. Welcome home, Sir."

"Thank you, Niles. May I present my fiancée, Phillipa of Owlhill."

"Welcome, Miss Phillipa." Niles again bowed and stepped aside for them to enter.

As they walked into the foyer, Luther glanced at Phillipa. Her hand tightened on his arm. She seemed a bit frozen and it had nothing to do with the winter weather. He offered her a reassuring smile and rested his hand over hers.

The house was exactly as he remembered it—the huge stone foyer with a long staircase to the right leading up to the second floor. With its vast rooms and wide hallways, the place was made for the comfort of Horsemen, even when wearing their beast-halves.

Niles led the way up the stairs. "I've readied a room for you, Sir, but Lady Lavinia hadn't mentioned you would be bringing a guest. It will take a moment for us to prepare a room for Miss Phillipa."

"Not a problem," Luther said. "Please see that her room is adjoined to mine."

"Yes, Sir. Your mother wishes to meet with you in the library in one hour."

"Fine."

When they reached the top of the stairs and began walking down the hallway, Luther noted that many of the valuable gold and silver picture frames, as well as several pieces of antique furniture, were not in their usual place. He wondered if his family had simply decided to redecorate or, if things were as bad financially as Leticia had described, they had begun to sell off items of value.

Niles opened the door to one of the enormous guest rooms.

"A fire has been lit, so the room will be warm," the butler stated. "Is there anything you want? Tea, perhaps?"

Glancing at Phillipa, Luther asked, "Would you like some, love?"

"No, thank you," she replied quietly.

"We're fine, Niles. That will be all, thanks."

"Yes, Sir." Niles nodded. "As soon as Miss Phillipa's room is prepared, I will send a maid to alert her."

The butler left, closing the door behind him.

Phillipa sighed deeply, approached a chair cushioned in pale blue velvet, which stood by the fire and hesitated a moment before sitting.

"I'm almost afraid to touch anything," she said, glancing around the room.

Tapestries depicting a pastel garden in summer hung on the walls and a soft gray carpet covered most of the stone floor. Against one wall stood an enormous bed draped in a pale blue quilt with matching pillows. There was an oak trunk at the foot of it and a wardrobe across the room. In front of a picture window, from which the distant orchards could be seen, stood a round breakfast table and chairs. A silver pitcher, basin and two goblets embellished with tiny sapphires rested atop the table.

"It's just a room, Phillipa." He removed his saddle and harness then tossed them atop the bed. "Unfortunately overdone."

Closing his eyes, he shuddered, switching to Huform.

Once again covered in his human skin, pale with a hint of gold, Luther strode naked to the window and glanced out. Even though her nerves had gotten the better of her since arriving at Lawton Orchards, Phillipa couldn't control the lustful thrill coursing through her at the sight of Luther's gorgeous naked body.

Everything about this manor house made her feel socially inadequate and self-conscious, but if anything could calm her nerves, it would be a few moments wrapped in Luther's arms, filled with his cock and pleased beyond reason.

"It's really a beautiful home," she ventured, as she stood and approached him. She slipped her arms around him and rested her head against his shoulder.

He turned and enfolded her in a snug embrace. Phillipa sighed, loving the feel of his hard, naked body so close to hers. All she wanted was to shed her clothes and melt against him, but soon a maid would arrive to announce that her room was ready. Not only that, Luther had to speak with his mother shortly. Phillipa was beginning to believe his mother was the last person in the world she wanted to meet.

"This isn't a home, Phillipa," he said. "It's a garish sideshow."

"Why are you here, Luther?" She drew back just enough to meet his gaze. "You have such bitterness toward this place."

"I don't know," he sighed. "Maybe, deep inside, I have some connection to the Woodfield-Shire line. Most of all, I returned for the sake of my sister and brother. I do care for them. Leticia is the only one to whom I feel close."

"She seems very nice," Phillipa said honestly. At least Leticia appeared to have some genuine affection for Luther and she had made Phillipa feel welcome. She doubted she would get a similar reception from Lady Lavinia.

"I'm glad you insisted on stopping and buying me those clothes in Beetlebird Bay or else I'd feel completely out of place here. To think I got mad at you for spending so much money on clothes when your sister's outfit probably cost as much as the three you bought for me. Gods, Luther, are you sure I'm going to fit in? I don't want to embarrass you because I'm as far from royalty as night is from day."

He curled his lip. "Think about what you're saying, Phillipa. We're here because my brother has, for some unfathomable reason, turned into a drunken slob who's ruining the family business. I bought those clothes because I knew what you'd be up against here, not because I want a wife from an old bloodline. If I wanted that, I never would have left Lawton Orchards in the first place."

The more he spoke, the more his temper rose. Now his eyes were blazing and his handsome brow furrowed. He released his hold on her and began pacing the room.

"Luther —"

"I told you before you're worth more than my entire family line put together. If I'd have known coming here would make you doubt my feelings for you —"

"Luther —"

"It's absurd that you're even talking like this. Do you think any of this purist, my-dung-doesn't-stink attitude does anything but offend me? I don't —"

"Luther!" She giggled and covered his mouth with her hand. "Will you be quiet for a moment and let me speak?"

"Not if you're going to continue speaking nonsense," he said, his voice muffled since her hand covered his lips. He grasped both her wrists gently, guided her arms behind her back and kissed her.

When the kiss broke, they held each other's gaze. Most of the anger and anxiety they felt seemed to dissipate.

"I love you, Phillipa," he said.

"I love you too."

He was about to kiss her again, but someone tapped on the door.

"One moment," Luther said, reaching for his breeches and pulling them on. "Come in."

A young maid stepped inside. Her cheeks colored a bit as she cast a discreet glance over Luther's bare torso. Phillipa couldn't blame her. He was gorgeous.

"Miss Phillipa, your room is prepared," the maid said.

"Thank you." Phillipa approached the maid. She glanced over her shoulder at Luther. "I'll be right back. I just want to see where my room is."

She followed the maid into the hall and through the door to the room near Luther's. When they stepped inside, both women started a bit, since he stood by the door that adjoined their rooms. He wore a teasing smile on his lips and one broad shoulder rested against the wall.

"Very cute," Phillipa scolded.

"Is there anything else you need, Miss?" the maid asked.

"No. Thank you – What is your name?"

"Veronika, Miss."

"Thank you, Veronika."

The maid left quickly and once the door closed behind her, Luther took Phillipa in his arms and covered her neck with kisses.

"This is what I love about adjoining rooms," he said. "And this affair is all the more exciting because I'm stealing into the boudoir of an engaged woman."

"Engaged to you, fool." She chuckled, squirming as he teased her ear with his tongue. "Even though it might be fun to pretend I'm being ravished by a gorgeous thief, like in the story of the Masked Horseman."

"Ah. Why do all women seem to love that legend?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's the mystery."

"You're marrying a Fighting Carrier, the most upstanding of Horsemen, but you want to fantasize about a thief?"

"More dangerous than human highwaymen," Phillipa said in a tone of mock drama. "The infamous Masked Horseman soared through the night, terrorizing the rich and showering poor maidens with treasure and kisses."

"Good gods." Luther paused in kissing her, his brow furrowed and a teasing glimmer in his eyes. "How are the rest of us average Horsemen supposed to compete with that?"

"There's nothing average about you, Luther," she said, all traces of humor fading. "Nor any Horseman more romantic."

"I'd better start living up to that image, then." He swept her into his arms, carried her to the bed and placed her upon it.

He sat beside her, his gaze fixed on hers, and lightly stroked her temple and cheek with his fingertips. It sometimes amazed her that a creature so powerful always treated her with such tenderness. Horsemen far surpassed men and even true-horses in strength, and though she felt the power in him, he had never harmed her, even accidentally.

His gaze moved from her face to her shirt and he unfastened the ties on it. He reached inside her shirt and cupped first one breast, then the other. Then he leaned down and kissed her. The kiss was chaste at first, a mere brush of his lips against hers. He kissed the corner of her mouth, then took her lower lip between his teeth and ran his tongue along it.

Phillipa looped her arms around his neck and gently bit his upper lip. Simultaneously their tongues reached for one another, stroking and exploring. Luther took her face in his hands. His thumbs caressed her cheeks, then he moved one hand down to her neck and covered it with his palm. It rested there lightly for a moment while he teased her with deep, sweet kisses.

Luther stood and removed his breeches. The sight of his lean, rock-hard body with its broad shoulders and long sinewy legs incited her desire even more. Phillipa smiled slightly and couldn't resist touching him. Kneeling on the bed, she reached out and slid her hands up his sleek stomach and over his chest. Her fingers tightened on the plates of muscle, relishing their hardness and the sensation of his warm flesh dusted with hair in all the right places.

He stepped closer and she ran her lips over his chest. She licked his flat nipples and along his ribs. The way his muscles twitched and his sharp intake of breath reminded her of how ticklish he was.

While she continued covering his chest and stomach with kisses, she took his cock in one hand and his balls in her other. The combination of soft and hard aroused and touched her on a deeper level than physical.

For all his power and amazing abilities, he was a living, breathing creature who felt pleasure and pain just like she did. It was sometimes easy to forget that Horsemen weren't invincible. Even they seemed to lose sight of that fact at times, which was why Luther had lost confidence after his near-fatal flight.

Suddenly, she wanted to give him unsurpassed pleasure, to feel him respond to her so they could relish the simple joy of being alive and together. The dream sharing had united them and Phillipa had never imagined her destiny to be this wonderful. She had been given a courageous, beautiful Horseman who returned all the love she felt for him. Few women were so lucky.

Still stroking his shaft, Phillipa gazed into his eyes and whispered, "Lie with me."

As if entranced, he slowly joined her on the bed. His hands on her waist, he guided her onto her back and covered her body with his. Already his temperature had risen and his cock was hard, thick and ready. She wanted him desperately, but they would have to wait a little longer.

"Luther, please," she murmured when he buried his lips against her neck, while at the same time reaching down and stroking her inner thighs. One of his long fingers slid inside her drenched pussy. He explored for a moment, then withdrew his finger and used its wet tip to caress her clit in slow circles. She arched against him, her eyes closed and heart thrumming in time with his stroking finger. "Oh Luther, I want—"

"Umm?" His voice was muffled against her shoulder. He continued running his fingertip over her clit and Phillipa wasn't certain she could restrain herself if he kept up that delicious motion.

"Please let me." She pushed against him and he paused, lifting his head and gazing at her, his brow furrowed.

"What?" he asked.

"Let me feel you. Kiss you. Please." She pushed against him again, knowing her strength meant little to him.

A slight smile on his lips, he moved onto his back and she draped her body halfway over his. She caressed his hair-dusted legs with the sole of her foot while her hand roamed over his stomach and hips. Closing her eyes, she pressed her face against his hair, loving its fresh scent. Then she brushed it aside so she could tease his ear with her tongue.

"Gods, Phillipa," he murmured when her hand once again curved around his cock and stroked.

She used the tip of her tongue to trace the shape of his ear, running it up and down its pointed length. His ear twitched with pleasure and she grinned. There were few things in this world as adorable as Horseman ears.

While she explored the curves of his ear, she tightened her grip on his cock and stroked more vigorously. His breathing quickened and muscles tightened as his pleasure grew. Phillipa interspersed steady pumps of her hand with sweeps of her thumb over his cock head and along its sensitive underside. She felt the first droplets of his essence and her clit throbbed. Arousing him excited her to a fevered pitch. She wished these moments could last forever, but that was impossible.

"Phillipa, ah." He groaned, his hips thrusting into her stroking hand.

Her tongue moved from his ear to caress the side of his neck. She licked her way to the base of his throat, then back to his neck, where she paused a moment and rested her lips against a distended artery, feeling it throb fast and hard. Like her, he teetered on the edge of passion.

With a suddenness that stole her breath, he rolled atop her, his hands braced on either side of her head and his intense blue gaze upon her.

"Phillipa," he whispered.

"Please," she gripped his back, loving the feel of hard muscles beneath hot flesh. "Fuck me, Luther. Fuck me hard."

His eyes practically glowed with desire and he used his knee to part her legs. She spread her thighs wide as he shifted position so the tip of his cock rested against the entrance to her lust-slicked pussy.

"Luther!" she said impatiently when he didn't move. Her hips thrust upward, trying to force him deep inside.

A mischievous, yet virile, smile tugged at the corners of his lips, and with one long, powerful thrust, he filled her.

"Oh!" Phillipa cried, her eyes slipping shut. She clung to him hard, her legs locked around his waist.

He pumped into her fast and with just enough roughness to thoroughly excite her.

Phillipa gripped the taut muscles of his shoulders and back.

"Yes. Oh gods," she panted, remembering to keep her voice low because they were no longer alone at Owlhill. Such restraint proved difficult when she wanted nothing more than to moan and scream his name. "Please. Oh please, don't stop. I need you so, so much."

His breathing ragged in her ear and his warm breath teasing her, he drove his cock in and out of her pussy, rubbing her in all the right places.

He covered her mouth with his and quickened his thrusts, driving her over the edge. Phillipa gasped into his mouth, her body throbbing and tingling from head to toe.

A moment later, he came, tearing his mouth from hers and panting hard. Phillipa clung to him, still in the throes of passion.

He collapsed atop her and she lay spent beneath him, that one orgasm more intense than any she'd ever felt before.

* * * * *

On his way to the library to speak with his mother, Luther noticed even more of the furniture and antiques were missing. He dreaded this meeting, but couldn't avoid it. From her letter, Lavinia Woodfield-Shire was no more eager to see her son—other than for the hope that he would salvage the family business—than he was to see her.

As a child, he'd sometimes wished for her to show him even a hint of affection. That desire had passed quickly and it had been ages since he'd thought of her as anything other than a mother in name only. When he'd been injured, near death, and she hadn't so much as sent a message inquiring about his health, he hadn't felt hurt, but relieved.

Any contact with her meant petty insults regarding his choice of careers and a lecture about the importance of keeping the old bloodlines alive. If she hadn't been such a shrew, he might have pitied her, for the woman seemed to have not a bit of love in her heart. He couldn't blame her entirely.

Such coldness was passed down in the Woodfield-Shire line, as if affection for one's spouse and children was filthy and embarrassing rather than natural. Luther rebelled against that tradition with every fiber of his being.

Upon reaching the library, he rapped once on the door.

"Enter," came Lavinia Woodfield-Shire's curt reply.

Luther opened the heavy oak door and stepped inside. The large round room, with shelves built into the walls from floor to ceiling, had always been one of his favorites. Luther enjoyed reading and, as a child, had often crept down from his room at night and lost himself in stories of adventure.

Perhaps those wild dreams had pushed him toward a career as a Fighting Carrier. He noted with some disappointment that, while the library still held hundreds of books and scrolls, many of the shelves were empty.

Lavinia sat by a roaring fire. She was a fairly tall woman, though not as tall as Phillipa. Her hair, once pale blond like Luther's, was now almost white. She wore it

piled atop her head in an arrangement of thick curls. Simple gold hoops adorned her pointed, Horseman-like ears. She had an attractive oval face with chiseled cheekbones, large blue eyes and an aquiline nose. Though no longer a young woman, Lavinia had aged well. Probably because she had spent her life worrying for no one but herself.

Tea for one was spread on the table beside her.

"So you came after all," she said, glancing at him briefly, then turning back to the fire and taking a sip of tea.

"Your letter was most intriguing."

"Intriguing?" she snapped, glaring at him. "You call the ruination of our family by your incompetent brother intriguing?"

"Leticia has given me some of the details," Luther said, completely ignoring her outburst. "Tell me the rest, so that I can determine if the situation is salvageable."

He didn't wait for her to offer him a chair, but approached and dropped nonchalantly into the seat across from her.

"I have no idea what has gotten into Linton, but these past months he has completely lost interest in running the family business and has also dropped out of the Winter Classics Competition. Your sister has resorted to riding Basil Norwood-Perry simply to keep our name in the competition." She spoke Basil's name with distaste.

"What about the business?" Luther had absolutely no interest in the Classics Competition nor did he have any problem with Basil Norwood-Perry.

"He's been spending money wildly and didn't bother making any of the usual delivery arrangements for the fall. You know that's the biggest time for our cider business, as well as our wool."

In addition to their orchards, the Woodfield-Shires raised sheep and shipped wool, as well as sold cloaks and sweaters, all over the world.

"To compensate for our lack of funds, we resorted to cutting the servants' wages, including the ones who work the fields. Needless to say, the ungrateful peasants didn't like the idea of that. Can you imagine? Some of them have worked here for generations."

"The nerve of them," Luther said sarcastically. "Imagine wanting fair wages for a fair day's work."

"Fair day's work?" Lavinia scoffed, either not noticing or not caring about his cutting tone. "Many of them quit and left Lawton Orchards. Most of the ones who have remained have become lazy, sloppy workers. I would turn out the lot of them if we weren't so desperate."

"Exactly how far in debt are we?" Luther asked.

"Quite a bit. I couldn't figure out your brother's bookkeeping, especially these past few months. Everything you require should be over there." She pointed across the room to a desk with several ledgers piled atop it.

Luther sat, staring at her for several moments until Lavinia actually squirmed with discomfort.

"What is it?" she demanded.

"Why should I help you?"

"Because you're a Woodfield-Shire," she stated icily. "I know you have denied your bloodline and dishonored your family –"

"I've dishonored our family?" He gave a snort of irritated laughter. "Amusing."

"I don't see what's amusing about it," she retorted. "If you hadn't run off on your duty and become a Fighting Carrier, none of this would have happened."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because you have a far better head for business than your brother. Luther, those times when your father was too ill to properly manage the family business, you were the one we depended upon to see that we didn't lose everything. You asked for leave from the Fighting Carriers and you came home to fulfill your duty."

That much was true. Even though his family had never supported him, he had foolishly gone out of his way several times to lend aid during various crises. Each time, his parents would pressure him to return home permanently. Not out of love for him, but because he was the eldest son and should, by tradition, remain on Woodfield-Shire land.

Lavinia continued, "In addition to your business sense, you are simply made for the Classics Competitions. If you had remained here and continued competing, the Woodfield-Shire name would be as powerful in the Classics as it had been when your father was involved. Instead, you waste your talents playing hero to humans and commoners."

"There's human blood in all of us."

"Not for generations in our line. Our entire family is Horsemen and daughters of Horsemen. That is where your loyalty should lie."

"I've been away from this house for eighteen years. Why are you lecturing me instead of Linton? He's the one father passed the business on to. By law, I can't take over without his approval."

"You're wrong," Lavinia said with a smirk. "You didn't bother to grace us with your presence for the reading of your father's will. He stated that Linton was to take over the business and should he fail, that duty would fall to you."

"And if I refuse the duty?"

For the first time, Lavinia appeared concerned. Any and all arrogance faded from her expression and she lowered her gaze. "Luther, I have no wish to beg you, but I will if I must. Most of our business contacts will not work with a family headed by a woman, so neither your sister nor I can do this. I prefer not to involve any of our male relatives, such as cousins or uncles, for assistance. Not only would they relish our

downfall, but they would do all in their power to take Lawton Orchards for themselves. Think of your sister. She, at least, means something to you."

Luther drew a deep breath and released it slowly. That much was true. He did care about Leticia and, as much as he disliked his mother, he preferred her to most of his relatives. The cousins and uncles matched, if not surpassed, her in arrogance and they would love to get their greedy hands on Lawton Orchards.

"Once Leticia marries or if Linton comes to his senses, then all will be well again and you can go back to your Fighting Carriers, but until then —"

"All right. I will consider it," he said.

"Think quickly. We might not have much time. You may go."

Luther raised his eyes to the heavens and stood. Partway to the door, his mother's voice stopped him. "You will be at dinner tonight. There will be several neighbors attending to welcome you home."

"Really." Luther's voice dripped sarcasm. "And how did they know I would be coming home?"

"I told them. You will make it seem like you've come home of your own accord, of course?"

"We wouldn't want them thinking there was any particular reason for my return," Luther stated. His insides twisted with disgust. It was bad enough he would most likely be dealing with their snooty neighbors and associates soon enough without having to dine with them on his first night back. Also, he had hoped to ease Phillipa into life at Lawton Orchards and not toss her into a snobbish dinner party so soon.

"I understand you have brought a woman with you," Lavinia ventured.

Luther spun, stared directly into her eyes and spoke with authority, "I have brought my fiancée and you knew all about it. I told you in my letter she would be accompanying me."

"Yes. I recall something about that."

"Don't play the fool with me, Mother." His lip curled. "You know what I wrote, just as you know you received an invitation to our wedding, which you ignored."

"I didn't..."

"Yes. You did."

"Only because I didn't think you really wanted me to come."

"Why else would I send an invitation?"

"Of course. I apologize," she said, lifting her chin. "However, since you will be busy here, I assume the wedding will be postponed?"

He stared at her in shock, then laughed long and without a trace of humor. "Are you completely out of your mind? Phillipa and I will be married in two weeks, as planned."

"I can see you're eager to wed."

"Very eager."

"Then of course you won't change your plans. It might actually look better for the family if you marry. That way, at least, it will appear as if we intend for the line to carry on. Now since I heard that your woman—"

"Phillipa."

"I heard that Phillipa arrived astride you in messenger's attire. So that she will feel less out of place at dinner, I will have a maid send her one of my dresses. Niles said she was slightly taller than I am, but that shouldn't matter too much for tonight. Of course you'll have appropriate attire made—"

"Phillipa has appropriate attire. And considering what you have told me about this family's financial situation, you should be preparing to accept charity rather than give it."

Lavinia's face froze and she spoke through clenched teeth. "How *dare* you? In case you've forgotten, you are part of this family."

"Did you decide that before or after you realized you needed me back, because at no time over the past eighteen years have you made me feel like part of this family."

"It was you who did the leaving, Luther. Naturally, I assumed you wanted nothing more to do with us."

Her twisting of the truth made him furious enough to change to his beast-half and kick holes in the wall. Yet he remained outwardly calm, something that both his life as a Woodfield-Shire and his service in the Fighting Carriers had taught him.

"If you have nothing else to discuss, I intend to give Phillipa a tour of the estate."

"Go on, then." Lavinia waved her hand and turned her attention back to the fire.

An unsettled feeling in his belly, Luther strode out of the room, grateful to be away from Lavinia. He could hardly wait for Linton to return so he could give the brat a sound thrashing. Linton had wanted control of Lawton Orchards so he should be home cleaning up his own mess instead of flitting around the countryside doing the gods knew what.

Chapter Twelve

Friendly Enemies

Luther felt a sense of relief as soon as he left his mother's presence. Rather than mellowing with age, Lavinia had grown even colder and more unreasonable.

He went directly to Phillipa's room and knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" she called.

"Luther."

"Are you alone?"

"Of course."

"Come in."

Stepping inside, he understood the reason for her question. Phillipa lounged in a large tub of water. She looked gorgeous with her black hair piled atop her head and her bare shoulders and breasts glistening with moisture. His cock swelled and his heartbeat quickened with desire.

He closed the door and walked toward her. "Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?"

"Tell me." She smiled at him.

"I'd rather show you." He bent, took her face in his hands and kissed her. His hand strayed to her breast, curved around the plump sphere and kneaded gently. The feeling of her warm, wet flesh aroused him even more.

"Umm," he groaned softly and rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. It stiffened and she arched against him.

"Oh Luther," she purred, locking her arms around his neck.

Not caring about the water drenching his clothes, he picked her up and placed her on her feet beside him. He reached for a towel folded on a nearby chair, wrapped it around her shoulders and rubbed gently. Having no desire to rush, he slowly dried her off from head to toe, savoring the sight, scent and feel of her.

When he finished, he tossed the towel aside, knelt in front of her and covered her belly and hips with kisses.

"There's going to be a dinner tonight with my family and several neighbors," he said, and felt her stiffen. "You don't need to be there, Phillipa. I can say you have a headache."

"No. It will be fine. How is your mother?"

"Charming as always," he said with a hint of sarcasm, standing and brushing her mouth with a kiss. "Get dressed and I'll show you around the manor before the guests start arriving."

She donned a simple, yet elegant, tunic-style gown a slightly darker blue than her eyes and slipped her feet into matching boots of soft leather. While she sat in a chair, he braided her locks. He loved touching her silky black hair, feeling it slide through his fingers and catching the pleasant, herbal scent from the soap she used on it.

Phillipa's eyes slipped shut and she sighed with pleasure at the sensation of his hands on her hair. Whenever he touched her, she felt comforted, yet aroused at the same time. She'd never imagined loving anyone as much as she loved him.

When he finished with her hair, Phillipa gazed at herself in the mirror, her brow furrowed. "Do I look good enough?"

"You look beautiful." He kissed her cheek and offered her his hand.

"Look at your clothes," she said. "They're all wet from when you took me out of the tub. You can't go to dinner like that. You'd better change."

He smirked. "You've only been here a couple of hours and already you're starting to sound like a Woodfield-Shire."

"Even after we marry, Luther, that's one thing I don't think I'll ever be."

"Thank the gods," he said and pulled her into his arms. "I love you exactly as you are."

They walked to his room where he quickly changed into a black tunic-style shirt trimmed in gold and snug black breeches that accentuated his long, sinewy legs. He bound his hair at his nape with a black ribbon.

Phillipa couldn't keep from admiring his handsome, yet refined, appearance. The perfect combination of virility and grace, he was all hers.

They left his room and he guided her throughout the house, showing her the guest rooms, library, parlor and great hall. They finally stepped into a vast room which displayed paintings of Horsemen from the Woodfield-Shire line as well as shelves filled with cups and ribbons won in Classics Competitions.

Phillipa examined the paintings carefully. Each Horseman had pale blond hair, a cream or white coat and blue eyes. Though they were a handsome lot, to Phillipa, Luther outshone them all. She paused in front of a portrait of an especially attractive stallion who looked more like Luther than the others. He stood on a grassy hill, his beast-body powerfully muscled and his coat and wings snowy and sleek. His golden hair was plaited down his back.

"My father," Luther said and stood beside her gazing at the painting. "Lance Woodfield-Shire."

Phillipa glanced at Luther and noted a look of admiration in his eyes. No matter what he felt for his family, she knew he still bore a certain respect for his father.

"He was very handsome," she said. "Like his son."

A slight smile tugged at his lips.

"And these awards?"

"All these are his." Luther gestured to the cups and ribbons on the shelves near Lance's portrait. "The awards belong to the Horseman whose portrait they're arranged around."

"Where are yours?" she asked, noting that several of his ancestors had won or placed well in quite a few competitions.

He led her toward the back of the room to a vast section of awards around a painting of Luther.

"It was done when I was sixteen," he explained. "I'd just won the Winter Classics for my third consecutive year."

Phillipa smiled, noting he had been a slender, poised colt who hadn't quite grown into his strong features. The artist had captured the rebellious look in his large, elfin eyes. That look hadn't changed much over the years.

"You were adorable," she said.

"Gawky. However, I was collected."

"You must have been. Gods, Luther, did you win or place in every competition you entered?" Phillipa glanced over the awards, impressed that he'd massed so many in a relatively short career in the Classics.

"Yes," he said.

"Do you miss competing?"

"No."

"How can that possibly be true?" a woman's voice interjected.

Phillipa and Luther turned toward a tall, attractive woman walking toward them. She wore a frigid smile and Phillipa noted that, like Luther's sister, she had elongated Horseman ears. Though she had large eyes, tilted up at the corners as Luther's were, the expression in them was nothing like her son's, for Phillipa had no doubt this was Lavinia Woodfield-Shire. In spite of her feminine beauty, she had a cold, cunning look.

"You were born to compete, Luther," she said. "It's a crime that you stopped."

"I didn't stop, Mother," Luther replied, his tone as chilly as hers. "Instead of playing war in the Classics, I prefer to engage in the real thing with the Fighting Carriers."

"I can't imagine why. Risking your life on a daily basis. Flying in the heat and cold and fighting those horrible creatures." She gave a little shudder. "Savage and unbecoming of a Woodfield-Shire."

"Lady Lavinia?" Phillipa interjected, extending her hand in a gesture of friendship though she already guessed the woman had no intention of accepting her. "I'm Phillipa."

Lavinia glanced at her hand with an expression of distaste, before she shook it limply.

"What family are you from?" she asked, her discerning gaze sweeping Phillipa from head to toe. "It's not an old bloodline. I can tell by looking at you."

"That's enough, Mother," Luther snapped.

Lavinia blinked, trying unsuccessfully to pull off a look of innocence. "I'm merely trying to get to know your intended. Phillipa, was your mother from a Horseman family?"

"No. She was human," Phillipa stated. As much as she'd loved Luther on sight, she loathed his mother just as intensely. How in the world had a decent, selfless man like Luther come from a woman like this?

"Ah," she replied, somehow in that single word revealing her distaste of Phillipa's "common" ancestry. "And your father?"

"Her father was a Fighting Carrier," Luther stated. "Of excellent reputation."

"I'm sure. Did Luther tell you we're having a dinner party tonight? I hope you won't be too uncomfortable, Phillipa."

"Who is comfortable at such things?" Luther demanded.

"Luther, such crudeness." Lavinia looked pained.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to finish our tour of the house before the guests arrive." Luther took Phillipa's hand and they headed for the door.

"Of course. I'll accompany you."

Luther's hand jerked a bit in Phillipa's and his jaw tightened visibly. She squeezed his hand and met his gaze, offering a slight smile that she hoped to be reassuring. He returned it, though the gesture appeared slightly forced.

They visited a sitting room and another parlor before stepping into the kitchen.

"Luther, really. I can't believe you're actually bringing her to the kitchen," Lavinia stated. "Speaking of crude."

"Mother, eating is one of those things we all do. Like sleeping, breathing and relieving oneself."

Lavinia curled her lip, her hand fluttering to her throat. "Too many years with those Fighting Carriers has turned you into a savage. Let's hope you can remember how to act properly before you take over the business."

"That has yet to be decided," Luther said, his brow furrowed as he glanced around the kitchen where the chef was busy cooking a meal fit for royalty. "How many people did you invite this evening?"

"The Norwood-Perry family, the Ironhill-Lakes, the Featherhill-Mertons—"

"You're telling me you've invited all those people for a meal this extravagant, yet you've cut the servants' wages in half?" Luther demanded.

Lavinia glared. "What do you suggest we do? Serve them dried apples and stale oats?"

"I suggest you cease hosting affairs such as this until we can afford it."

"Luther, this is neither the time nor the place." Lavinia glanced from Phillipa to a couple of maids who had their heads bent over their work, pretending to ignore the conversation.

"If I decide to stay, we're going to have a long talk about changes around here," Luther said in a low voice.

They left the kitchen and entered the great hall at almost the same moment Leticia stepped in on the arm of a tall, slender Horseman with reddish-blond hair and piercing green eyes. An older man and woman whose reddish-blond hair was streaked with gray followed them.

Leticia smiled warmly and tugged the Horseman toward Phillipa. Their companions followed.

"Phillipa, please meet Basil Norwood-Perry and his aunt and uncle, Beatrix and Bernard. Their family owns Falcon Valley several miles south of Lawton Orchards. Basil, this is Phillipa, Luther's fiancée."

Beatrix and Bernard nodded to her in greeting, then turned to speak with Lavinia.

Basil, apparently far more personable, took Phillipa's offered hand, bowed over it and said, "A pleasure." She noted his voice was rather husky and he carried himself with almost military precision, his movements quick and smooth. He glanced at Luther. "Hello, Luther. Good to see you again."

"And you, Basil. Leticia tells me she's riding you in the Winter Classics."

"Yes. She's an excellent rider. We'll do well together."

"Confidence," Phillipa said. "I like that."

"So do I," Basil agreed. "Without it, why bother competing at all? Speaking of competition, do you plan to get back into it now that you're home, Luther?"

"We hope he will," Lavinia said. "It's been too long since the Woodfield-Shires entered, other than Leticia as a rider of course."

"I'll have to think about it," Luther said.

"Of course, you would have more important matters on your mind at this time," Beatrix said.

"Such as?" Luther asked, meeting her gaze.

"Why don't we all sit down?" Lavinia suggested and summoned Niles, who immediately showed them to the table, then went to bring wine. In the meantime, the other guests arrived and Phillipa grew more uncomfortable with each passing moment.

Other than Leticia and Basil, they were a snobbish, condescending group. Each family seemed to have been poured from the same mold. The women all had Horseman

ears and each looked so much like the others that they reminded her of puppies from the same litter or horses from the same sire and dam.

Luther had told her during the flight to Lawton Orchards that most of the families had one or two physical abnormalities, such as the inability to sweat, poor hearing or brittle bones from breeding too closely for so many generations.

Phillipa twisted her hands beneath the table. Her stomach knotted from nerves and she wondered how she could possibly manage to eat. All too soon, the food was served. Phillipa glanced across the table at Luther, noting he looked different from the man she knew. His expression was cool, unreadable. He ate with polite efficiency without seeming to enjoy the delicious food. Under normal circumstances, Phillipa would have thoroughly appreciated such a meal, but not now.

The others spoke of business, social events and the upcoming Winter Classics Competition.

It seemed as if the evening would go well until Beatrix Norwood-Perry said, "I must admit, Lavinia, I was surprised by the invitation to such a wonderful feast, considering the problems you've been having at Lawton Orchards."

A hush fell over the table and Phillipa noted rage burning in Lavinia's eyes. Only Luther continued eating and sipping from his goblet of cider as if nothing was amiss.

Basil's eyes flashed and he said, "Aunt Beatrix, this is neither the time nor the place."

Phillipa noted that Basil had leaned a bit closer to Leticia and glanced at her, as if concerned that his aunt's callous remark might have upset her. Leticia met his gaze and her face colored the slightest bit.

Beatrix's eyes widened in mock innocence. "I simply wanted to reassure this family that it needn't put on airs and that the Norwood-Perry family will be more than happy to help in whatever way we can."

Luther placed his fork aside and gazed at her with a pleasant smile. "Thank you so much for your kindness, Beatrix, however we're not quite so desperate yet. Nor would we consider imposing upon the Norwood-Perry family, considering it's only been a couple of centuries since you've secured your place in society after years as overseers at Lawton Orchards. It would be inappropriate for us to ask you to service us again so soon."

Beatrix's face turned scarlet with rage and the rest of the Norwood-Perry family stiffened visibly. The other guests glanced around the table, waiting for more fodder for gossip. Luther had told her how much one bloodline enjoyed spreading stories about another.

"Why don't we all finish eating?" Leticia suggested, glancing from Basil, whose teeth were gritted and ears pinned tightly to the sides of his head, to Luther, whose ears were also pinned, though he still wore a most pleasant smile.

Phillipa's stomach churned. How could she possibly endure staying here for an extended period of time? She wished she and Luther were back in Owlhill in their own house, where all that mattered was each other.

* * * * *

By the time dinner ended, Luther was ready to leap out of his skin from annoyance. When the last guest had gone, he turned to Phillipa and said, "I need to get some air. Do you mind? I'll meet you upstairs soon."

"I could use some time alone too," she murmured.

"Phillipa," he grasped her shoulders gently and gazed into her eyes, "are you all right?"

"Yes." She nodded, but he didn't quite believe her.

If this place affected her badly, he had no intention of staying. His family, in particular his mother, was difficult to take and his loyalty remained with Phillipa, not with them.

"I'll walk upstairs with you."

"No. Go get some air. I'm fine."

He brushed her lips with a kiss before she turned away and walked upstairs. He noted that she seemed drained from the dinner. Not that he blamed her. The more time he spent at Lawton Orchards, the more he understood exactly why he'd left. He didn't want to leave Phillipa alone too long, because she looked as if she needed some attention. One thing he would not do while here was allow her to feel neglected. Even if he decided to stay and try to salvage the family business, she would always come first.

Right now he simply needed a quick run and a short flight to relieve the stress that had built up throughout the meal. He hadn't meant to offend the entire Norwood-Perry family with his rebuttal to Beatrix, but the woman had made him furious with her insult disguised as a helping hand.

For a moment, he thought Basil was going to start an argument. He'd known the man all his life and one thing Basil didn't take kindly to was insults. However, something had stopped him and he'd allowed the conversation to fade toward other things. That was good, considering Luther had been in the mood for a fight since stepping onto Woodfield-Shire land. His family and their acquaintances certainly brought out the worst in him.

He swallowed moss smoke, left the house through a back door, tore off his fine clothes and tossed them carelessly in the snow. Naked and shivering from the cold, he switched quickly to his full-coated beast-half.

As soon as the momentary weakness that followed shapeshifting passed, he took off at a gallop, his powerful legs devouring the snowy ground. He circled the field several times at a breakneck pace, then caught sight of Phillipa standing by the house.

He ran toward her, noting as he approached that she had changed into breeches, a shirt and a heavy cloak.

"Care for a ride?" he asked, only slightly breathless from his run.

"I'd love it," she said.

"I warn you, I'm in the mood for speed."

"So am I. After that dinner, we both need it."

A smile tugged at his lips. "That's true enough. Mount up."

He knelt so she could easily slip onto his back. The sensation of her legs gripping his sides and her arms wrapped around his man-torso sent a thrill of desire through him.

Again he galloped off, only this time he didn't circle the field, but ran straight ahead. Mile after mile he raced, until his heart pounded and sweat dampened his coat. Then he extended his wings and rose swiftly into the air, flying as fast as he could, releasing every bit of anger and frustration in a flight that challenged him as he raced against himself.

His legs churned and wings pounded the cold night air. He flew faster, pushing for more speed even when he felt as if he'd reached his limit. Phillipa rode him as if their bodies were one. Every shift of her weight, each motion of her leg and caress of her hand on his man-chest seemed to bind them even closer than they already were.

Finally, calmer emotionally and almost spent physically, he slowed his pace and glided through the air, his wings spread wide. His breath came in raw pants and his body felt like an inferno, but at least he was once again in control of himself.

He landed near the tack house and Phillipa dismounted. By now he was shivering from the cold on his sweat-drenched body and needed a blanket while he walked to cool down. He retrieved one from the tack house and Phillipa helped him cover his beast-half. Together they circled the building at a leisurely walk.

"Feel better?" Phillipa asked, gazing at him.

He nodded and squeezed her hand. "How are you? I feel terrible about putting you through all this."

"I'm fine. It's not that bad, Luther."

"Yes, it is."

"It's just a different life than I'm accustomed to. I'll get used to it."

"No, you won't."

"Will you stop being such a defeatist? With you, the grain bin is always half empty."

He gave a snort of laughter. "Phillipa, I never got used to this life, so how can I expect you to? Would you even want to?"

"Honestly? No. And what did you mean earlier when you said your servants' wages have been cut?"

He explained the family's situation to her.

"How do you plan to fix these problems?"

"I'm not yet sure I even want to."

She shrugged. "It's up to you, but I like your sister. If this will help her, then it might be worth it. She seems to care about you very much."

"She and Linton would be my only reasons for helping. Whatever is going on with Linton, there must be a reason. He's always been rather flutter-brained, but never a drunken slob. I wish he'd come home, so I can at least talk to him and hear his side of it."

Phillipa edged a bit closer and smiled. "You're a good man, Luther."

By the time they'd finished talking, he'd cooled down enough for a brushing and rubdown. Working together, they groomed him quickly, since he didn't want her to linger in the cold tack house.

Finally, they returned to the manor and went to his room, where they planned to spend the night.

"I'm going to get a book to read," Luther said. "Maybe it will help me unwind."

"If that flight didn't do it, nothing will."

"I don't know about that. I bet you could think of a few ways to relax me."

She grinned and slipped her arms around his neck, rubbing her nose against his. "I'll think of a few ways and we can try them when you get back."

He kissed her deeply, his heart fluttering with desire, then took a lantern, left the room and hurried toward the library. The faster he returned, the faster he and Phillipa could –

"Luther, I want to speak to you." Lavinia's voice stopped him and he paused, raising his eyes to the heavens. The last thing he wanted at the moment was a talk with his mother.

He turned to her, noting that she wore her dressing robe and also carried a lantern. "Can't this wait until morning?" he asked.

"No. It can't."

"Very well. I was on my way to the library."

"Fine. We'll talk there."

They continued down the hall and stepped into the library.

"This evening was a disaster," Lavinia began as soon as she closed the door behind her.

"No more disastrous than usual, from what I recall."

"Then you don't recall well enough," she snapped. "The humiliation was unbearable. Imagine Beatrix Norwood-Perry offering us *charity*? And that peasant fiancée of yours didn't help us at all. Imagine what they must have thought upon seeing her?"

Once again, Luther boiled with rage. "They once worked for us, so why should you give a donkey's ass what they think? All that aside, Phillipa is better than you, them and all the old bloodlines strung together."

"You, my son, have been away for far too long."

"And I'm about to go away again, because tonight reminded me very clearly why I left in the first place."

The door opened and Phillipa stepped into the library, looking stunned to find the mother and son glaring at one another.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to intrude," she said.

"You're not. Come in," Luther told her.

"This is a *family* discussion, Luther," Lavinia stated.

"And she is my family. Phillipa, come here."

"Luther, maybe I should go back to my room and —"

"I said, come here!" he ordered, extending his hand in her direction.

Phillipa lifted her chin, a look of anger burning in her eyes. That was good. At least she now appeared like the confident, outspoken woman he'd fallen in love with. Lawton Orchards seemed to have robbed her of her self-assurance. The place could easily do that to a person, but he would not allow it to happen to her.

She stepped into the room and stood beside him, slipping her hand into his. Turning to her, he held her gaze and said, "We will be leaving tonight."

"You can't leave," Lavinia said. "What about Lawton Orchards?"

"What about it?" Luther curled his lip.

"We need you at home, Luther. You're already on leave from your Fighting Carriers and, according to Leticia, if you don't reenlist, you won't have to go back to them at all, so you have no reason for not helping us now. Helping us! It's your inheritance as much as Linton's or Leticia's."

"Not unless I give up my life and remain here permanently," he reminded her. "Which I have no intention of doing."

"You are still a Woodfield-Shire no matter what you say or do and no matter what company you choose to keep." She cast a scathing glance in Phillipa's direction.

Luther must have looked especially fierce, because Lavinia took a step back and her hand fluttered to the base of her throat.

"Luther," Phillipa said softly, her grip tightening on his hand.

He was too enraged to fully notice, yet he managed to speak in a deceptively calm voice. "Mother, insulting my dream lover isn't the way to tempt me into helping solve the family's problems."

Lavinia must have realized she had overstepped her bounds. Obviously desperate for him to remain at Lawton Orchards, she smiled weakly and said, "I apologize. I'm sure Phillipa is a...a lovely woman, however some things are not meant to be."

He snorted. "Not meant to be? She's my dream lover."

"You think you're the only one in the family to ever have a dream lover?" she snapped, her pale cheeks tinged pink as her emotions stirred. "You think I didn't have one? You think your father didn't? We denied the dream sharing to fulfill our duty to this family. For centuries, the Woodfield-Shires have refused any match outside acceptable families. You know this. The bloodline must be kept pure. You have an obligation—"

"Why?" He released Phillipa's hand and advanced on his mother who took several steps back. "Why must the bloodline be kept pure? So my children can have golden hair?" He scrubbed an angry hand through his long, pale locks. "So my daughters can have pointed ears? So my sons must ingest pond seed or moss smoke or die doing what they were born to do? Flying. Running. We are not pure, mother. We are *inbred*. *Flawed*."

Lavinia's temper overcame her and she slapped him hard enough to leave a bright red palm print on his cheek.

Phillipa's fists clenched and she took a step closer to Luther, but he held up his hand to stop her, his teeth gritted with rage.

"You want my help, *Lady Lavinia*?" he demanded. "I'll stay and clean up the mess this family has made, but with certain conditions. First, you will apologize to Phillipa for how you've been treating her since she arrived. Do *not* interrupt me," he snarled when Lavinia opened her mouth to speak.

She shut it promptly as Luther continued, "Second, you will show her the respect she deserves as my mate. Last, you will be present at our wedding two weeks from now. You will publicly show your acceptance of our union. You will do this, Mother, or you will never see me again and Lawton Orchards can go to hell, for all I care."

Lavinia stared at him with a combination of fear, hatred and resignation.

"What is your answer, and think carefully before you reply, because I will only make this offer once," he stated.

"I accept," she said bitterly and turned to Phillipa. "I apologize for any remarks that might have upset you."

Phillipa nodded and glanced at Luther, who felt almost angry enough to kill. She placed a hand on his arm and that touch seemed to ground him a bit.

"Is there anything else?" Lavinia asked quietly.

"I'll let you know," Luther replied. He placed his hand over Phillipa's and they strode out of the library.

Chapter Thirteen

Linton's Revenge

True to his word, the following morning Luther took steps to regain control of Lawton Orchards. His first order of business was to speak with Nigel about the working conditions of the house staff, then visit the workers' quarters. After that, he planned a flight to Lawton Valley, a small town on Woodfield-Shire property controlled by the family.

He told Phillipa of his plans when they sat down to a private breakfast in his room and she immediately offered to accompany him.

"Not that I wouldn't love your company, but the way things have been around here, I don't expect these visits to be very pleasant," he warned. "From what I've heard, the workers have been badly treated. I still can't understand what got into Linton to make him turn like this. Yes, he's always been a little flighty and a bit of a spoiled brat, but he's never been cruel and he always treated our workers fairly."

"Maybe he'll come home today."

Luther shrugged. "Doubtful. According to Leticia, he sometimes disappears for days at a time."

"You don't suppose he might have a lover?"

"If he had a lover, wouldn't he be happy instead of miserable?"

"That depends."

"A lover wouldn't drive a man to neglect his duties or mistreat those around him."

Phillipa smiled and shook her head. "Luther, not everyone has the backbone of a Fighting Carrier. We civilians sometimes slip up."

"I know about slipping up," he admitted, thinking about how foolishly he'd acted before she convinced him to return to the career he truly loved. Thinking about the Fighting Carriers made him realize that he would need to find someone to properly manage the estate before he reenlisted in the spring. He had agreed to help his family but he had no intention of remaining at Lawton Orchards forever.

"Well, I won't have any answers until Linton decides to show his face again. I haven't got time to worry about him. There's too much to do, especially today. Are you sure you wouldn't rather stay here with my mother?"

Phillipa stood abruptly and said, "Bring on the irate workers."

He chuckled. "I rather prefer them to my mother as well."

* * * * *

Luther thought it best to speak to Nigel privately, so Phillipa gladly accepted Leticia's invitation to visit the stable and go for a ride on a true-horse. The family owned several gorgeous riding horses, as well as draft horses used during the autumn harvest.

By the time the women finished their ride and returned their mounts to the stable, Luther approached in his full-coated beast-half, saying that he was ready to visit the workers' quarters. He'd donned a saddle and harness for Phillipa and she mounted easily, once again relishing the difference between riding a Horseman and a true-horse.

When they arrived at the workers' quarters, Luther went from door to door, speaking to each family. Some seemed pleased to see him, while others had an obvious dislike of anyone with the Woodfield-Shire name. Regardless of their personal opinions of him, each gave the same unsettling story about severe cuts in wages and little or no order in the business.

An older, gray-coated Horseman called Stark provided the most information. As soon as he opened the door and saw Luther, he smiled broadly. "Lord Luther, when did you get back?"

"Yesterday. It's good to see you, Stark. This is my fiancée, Phillipa. Phillipa, Stark and his family have been with Lawton Orchards for longer than I can remember."

"Centuries," Stark told her, bowing from the neck. "An honor to meet you, miss. Would you both come inside? I'm afraid I haven't much to offer but tea. Money has been tight this year."

"That's actually why I've come," Luther said. He and Phillipa entered the cottage. A fire burned in the hearth. There was little furniture and, in spite of the obvious age of the place, it was neat and warm. "I want to get Lawton Orchards back in order."

Stark raised his eyes to the heavens. "Good luck. You could have me booted off the estate for saying this, but your brother has made a mess of things. He used to be fair, even generous, but this past year something happened to him."

"Do you have any idea what it was?" Luther asked. Thus far, none of the workers had made such personal comments about any of the Woodfield-Shires.

"This is just hearsay, but we suspected he was involved with the daughter of one of the new workers who was hired this year. A sheep shearer."

"The woman?" Phillipa asked, and Stark chuckled.

"No, miss. Her father sheared the sheep. Anyway, they were dismissed without good reason, as far as anyone could see. It was around that time your brother started acting strangely. He used to ride out and check the estate every day, but now we wouldn't see him for days at a time. He'd go down to Lawton Valley often and drink himself into a stupor. Needless to say, with his mind not right, the business started falling apart. Once it started losing money, he cut everyone's pay, and you must know the rest by now."

Luther glanced at Phillipa, who stared at him with a knowing look in her eyes. Was it possible she had been right about Linton having a lover? Could he have nearly

destroyed the family business over a woman? If it was a matter of life or death, he could understand, but not this nonsense.

"Well, tomorrow morning there will be a meeting of every worker and servant at Lawton Orchards. Things are going to change around here for the better."

"Glad to hear it." Stark looked relieved. "I wish you'd have come home sooner, Sir. Is it safe to say you'll be staying?"

"No. However, I won't leave until this mess is well on its way to being cleaned up."

A slight smile curved Stark's lips. "I didn't think anything would drag you away from the Fighting Carriers. I remember the year you left to join up. Your father was a misery to work for until he finally accepted the idea."

"I wasn't aware that he had ever accepted it."

A serious look crept into Stark's eyes and his smile faded. "He was damn proud of you, Luther. Damn proud."

Luther made no reply. For the first time, he was at a loss for words. If his father had been proud of him, he'd certainly kept it a secret from him. At one time, hearing that would have meant the world to him, but no longer. It was rather unfortunate.

After leaving the workers' quarters, they flew to Lawton Valley. During the flight, Phillipa considered Stark's words about Luther's father. It was such a pity he and Luther hadn't gotten along better and that Lance Woodfield-Shire couldn't have fully accepted his son.

Luther's reception in Lawton Valley was no warmer than it had been among most of the workers. They learned why when he stopped at the home of his old nanny, who had long since retired and lived in a cottage just outside the village square.

A tall, plump woman with lively green eyes and long salt-and-pepper hair, she greeted Luther with an exuberant embrace, which he returned. Phillipa couldn't help smiling when she saw how genuinely happy he seemed in her presence. She thought briefly that he should have been able to feel the same affection for Lavinia, but obviously this woman had been more of a mother to him than his own.

"Luther, it's so good to see you, love." She held him tightly, then stepped back and looked him over from head to toe with an expression of maternal pride. "Just as handsome as ever, but you look a little thin. Have you been eating enough?"

He laughed. "Yes. I've been eating enough, but preparing to reenlist in the Fighting Carriers, so I can't be getting fat."

"As if you ever were. You were such a skinny child. All that running and flying. This lovely young woman must be Phillipa." The nanny turned to Phillipa and grasped her hands. "Welcome, love. I'm Ada. Come in and have something to eat. It's nearly time for the midday meal."

"It's so good to finally meet you, Ada," Phillipa said. "Luther has told me so much about you."

"I took care of many children in my lifetime, but I admit that Luther, Leticia and Linton were my favorites. Though if I had your brother right now I'd box his pointed ears."

"You're not the only one," Luther muttered. "Don't tell me he's been treating you badly as well?"

"No. He's spared me. If he didn't, Leticia wouldn't let him live it down. The sweet girl still brings me extra food and gifts, even though things have been so bad for your family that they're taxing the people of Lawton Valley into the grave."

"What?" Luther demanded.

"He's more than doubled the taxes this year," Ada said, her eyes wide as she put a kettle of tea on the fire to boil. She took a loaf of bread and a round of cheese and brought it to the table where Phillipa and Luther sat. "People are moving away. They can't afford it. They're so angry with him that I fear for his life. When he gets drunk and passes out in the tavern, I'm afraid someone is going to stick a knife through his belly or crush his skull."

Phillipa and Luther exchanged glances and he wrinkled his nose. "That bad, is it?"

"I know you always thought I told too many stories, but this time I swear it. No exaggeration."

"Linton may not be killed by a villager," Luther muttered. "Because I might beat them to it. What has gotten into him?"

"I wish I knew," Ada said sadly. "Rumor has it he got a sheep shearer's daughter with child and your mother had the girl and her family thrown off the estate."

Phillipa could almost believe that story. Lavinia would be wicked enough to do such a thing, and by the sound of Linton, he'd be too weak-willed to fight her.

"Of course, I can't imagine Linton doing that to a young woman. He's a good boy at heart."

"He's no longer a boy," Luther said quietly, but Phillipa sensed his anger. "He's a man, and once he returns, he will start acting like it."

"You can't force him, Luther." Ada sat and took his hand. "No more than your parents could have forced you to stay at Lawton Orchards."

"But I didn't say I wanted to run the estate, then change my mind. I never wanted it."

"That's true," Ada admitted. "And I do hope you can do something with Linton, not only for our sake, but for his. He seems so unhappy."

"Unhappy?" Luther said with a curl of his lip. "From what I hear, he's drinking, gambling and has more women than a slaver's harem. How unhappy can he be?"

"Why?" Phillipa demanded. "Would that make *you* happy?"

Luther's eyes widened. "Of course not, love, but I'm mated. He's not."

"Or so you think," she said quietly.

"Back to the Horseman in love theory again?" he said.

"It's possible."

"I just hope he didn't get that girl breeding." Ada shook her head. "Speaking of breeding, your wedding was planned very quickly. You wouldn't happen to be—"

"Ada!" Luther looked stunned.

Phillipa bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing, not only at the woman's forwardness, but at Luther's expression.

"No, Ada, we're not breeding. Yet," she said. Beneath the table, she slid her hand over Luther's inner thigh.

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye, a devilish grin on his lips.

After sharing a meal with Ada, they said goodbye and headed home.

"It looks like I have plenty of work ahead of me," Luther said on the flight back to the manor house. "Thank you for putting up with all this. I know it's taken you away from your messenger service and—"

"Don't worry about it. I enjoy my work, but my place is with you. Besides, that new messenger in town was glad to take over. He wants to build a reputation for himself. I just hope he doesn't put me out of business completely."

"The idea of raising a family doesn't appeal to you at all?"

She paused for a moment and removed her hand from his harness to stroke his broad shoulders. Actually, she had been considering slowing down her messenger service once she and Luther had children. While she liked her job, after seeing how he and his siblings loved their nanny better than their mother, she realized that was one thing she never wanted to happen. She wanted to be a mother to her children and take part in their lives.

"It's actually starting to appeal to me more and more," Phillipa admitted.

"Really?" He glanced over his shoulder, a smile on his lips.

"Don't get too happy about it. I'll never be one of those subservient women."

"Never would have guessed."

She playfully slapped his shoulder and he deliberately lunged forward, causing her to wrap her arms around him for support.

"Turning into a clinging female, love?"

"You wish!"

"How I wish."

Phillipa began kissing his neck and back, while her hands stroked his chest and slid down his ribs. He jerked with laughter.

"Stop tickling. Are you trying to get us killed? I'm in midair!"

"Where's your sense of adventure?" She gripped his withers with her knees and rose high enough to nibble his earlobe.

"I'll give you adventure. Hang on tight."

She did as he ordered and he surged forward, his speed blinding. Phillipa clung to him, her eyes closed and face pressed against his back to shield herself from the whipping wind. The sound of his beating wings and the throb of his heartbeat stirred her and made her clit tingle.

If only they could stay like this. Free, happy and soaring across the sky.

* * * * *

That night, Luther met with the tax collector of Lawton Valley and instructed him to cut the taxes in half. Then he locked himself in the library for most of the night, looking over the ledgers and putting in order a plan he'd been formulating since arriving at the estate.

When he finally retired to his room, his head aching from so many hours of reading by candlelight, he felt a pleasant wave of happiness wash over him upon seeing Phillipa curled up on his bed. He undressed quietly so as not to wake her.

"Luther?" she whispered.

"Sorry to disturb you."

"You didn't. It's very late. Were you looking over the ledgers all this time?"

"Unfortunately." He sighed and slipped naked into bed.

She rolled toward him and he held her close, shutting his eyes and allowing himself to finally relax, though not for long. It would be morning in a few short hours.

"We're in bad shape, but the business is salvageable. It will take plenty of hard work through the rest of the winter, though. Tomorrow I'll straighten things out with the workers. I'm going to be spending most of my time working with them, because we'll be very short on staff."

"Whatever I can do to help, just let me know."

He smiled, kissed the top of her head and stroked the soft skin of her bare shoulder. "I love you."

"I love you too. Now get some sleep."

"I'm too wound up."

"Let me help," she purred and slid down his body.

"Phillipa."

"Trust me. After this, you'll be sleeping like a baby." He spread his legs as she knelt between them beneath the covers and stroked his cock.

Her skilled touch had him hard and throbbing within moments. When her warm, wet lips closed over his cock head, he closed his eyes and drew a sharp, pleased breath. Entwining his fingers in her hair, he tried to control the thrusting of his hips, difficult when she sucked him so deeply into her mouth that his cock head brushed the back of her throat.

Then she withdrew his shaft and lapped it from crown to base and back again. The tip of her tongue flicked the underside of his cock head in that ultra-sensitive place that made his heart pound and his breathing quicken.

"Oh gods, Phillipa." He groaned with desire. Somewhere in the back of his mind he thought he should try to hold back so he could pleasure her in return but she was licking and sucking him with a vengeance. The drives of his body overtook his reason. Finally he tried to pull her away before he exploded. "That's enough, you wicked wench. You're going to kill me."

"Luther?"

"Yes?"

"Do something for me?"

"Anything."

"Don't hold back."

At that moment, he hadn't the strength to refuse such a carnal temptation. He loosened his hold on her head and she once again took him deeply into her mouth, then slowly withdrew his staff so that she could flick her wicked tongue along the underside. While she licked, one hand stroked his shaft and the other kneaded his balls. This time when she took his cock head into her mouth he could no longer control his pleasure.

Stifling a cry of utter fulfillment so as not to rouse the entire household, Luther's hips arched off the bed and he came long and hard still trapped in her warm, wet mouth.

* * * * *

Luther walked through the crowd of workers and servants assembled in the great hall. Angry voices filled the room and many workers glared at him. He understood their anger, but also knew he would need to take a firm hand or else bear the brunt of their frustration.

In a stern voice, he called for attention and after a moment the group fell silent.

"I realize there have been problems here of late," he began.

"To say the least," someone interrupted and others joined in.

"Silence!" Luther stated. Once he had their attention again, he continued, "There will be changes at Lawton Orchards, starting with your wages."

"Don't tell me you're going to cut them again?"

"We can't live on what you're paying now!"

"We'll all quit!"

"Shut up and let him talk," Stark bellowed.

The workers grumbled, but eventually quieted down.

"Your wages will be returned to their normal amount, plus a seven percent increase," Luther said.

A collective gasp swept the room and people murmured.

"However, work will also increase over the winter. We will immediately begin shipping cider and wool worldwide, as well as firewood to villages in the North. Chopping and hauling will begin on the morrow. This spring, we'll plant new trees to replace what we take."

"What?"

"It's the dead of winter!"

"Nobody does this much work in the winter months."

"Silence!" Luther demanded. "We've lost much over the past months and if we're to survive we need to start working properly again and right away. From now on, you will earn a fair wage for a fair day's work. Anyone who does not wish to accept such an arrangement should leave now."

No one spoke or made a motion to go, so Luther went on. "If we manage to reach the goals I've set for us this winter, in the spring you will receive a bonus. Tomorrow, I expect the workers to meet me at the storage houses. If any of your wives or daughters can be spared, have them speak to Phillipa or Leticia, as we will be producing and selling wool cloaks and other garments as well."

"Will the women be compensated?" someone asked.

"Of course they will. Are there any other questions?"

"What about Lord Linton? Has he agreed to all this?"

"From now on, you answer to me, not Lord Linton. Is there anything else?"

No one said a word, so Luther dismissed them and strode out of the hall.

A short time later, he, Phillipa and Leticia were seated in the library going over the ledgers again when Lavinia stormed in.

"Are you mad?" She glared at Luther.

"What now?" he asked, scarcely bothering to glance at her since his attention was focused on a column of numbers.

"Did you agree to pay the workers their original wages and a seven percent increase, as well as a bonus in the spring?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"How do you intend to pay for it? We can scarcely support ourselves let alone pay these peasants more."

"Without these peasants, Lawton Orchards would not exist. I intend to split the profits we make this winter with the workers to cover their wages. By this time next year, we'll not only be making as much as previous years, but far more. Also, starting this week, we'll be using the great hall for the workers' wives and daughters to make clothes to sell. That way they can bring their children. Phillipa and Leticia are arranging for a rotation of child care here at the manor while the women sew."

Lavinia looked down her nose at him. "That is out of the question. What will the neighbors think if we have peasants and their children milling around our home?"

"I don't give a damn what the neighbors think. And no one will be milling around. They'll be working. Has Linton come home yet?"

"No," Lavinia said coolly. "But I'm beginning to think you're as mad as he."

"You called me here, Mother."

"Yes. Perhaps I shouldn't have."

"Mother, stop it," Leticia snapped. "Can't you see he's right about everything?"

"We'll see." Lavinia turned on her heel and left.

"She makes me furious." Leticia smacked her open palm onto the desk.

"Ignore her," Luther muttered, his brow furrowed in concentration as he continued reading the ledger.

"How can you remain so calm?" Leticia demanded.

"I don't have time to lose my temper," he said.

Phillipa shook her head, edged her chair closer to his and kissed his cheek. He glanced at her and smiled. If anything allowed him to keep his temper in check, it was Phillipa. Without her, this visit home would have been almost unbearable.

* * * * *

The following day, Luther's plans went into action. Rather than simply oversee Lawton Orchards, he worked alongside his people, chopping and hauling wood and making flights to arrange for the sale of cider, wool and other goods.

Most of the new workers whom Linton had hired cheaply to replace the old ones after he'd cut the wages rebelled against Luther's strict rules. For too many months they had done as they pleased, but now order had returned to Lawton Orchards. Several workers quit and others Luther fired. That meant more work for him and those who remained, but he wanted to weed out the lazy workers and hire new ones willing to properly earn their wages.

Though he set high standards for his people, he drove himself even harder, so they had little complaint. Over the following days they began to respect him, but Luther knew it would take time to fully gain their trust.

Phillipa dove into work as well and so did Leticia when she wasn't training with Basil for the Classics Competition.

Toward the end of the second week at Lawton Orchards, Luther's thoughts swung between the family businesses and his quickly approaching marriage. He intended to leave Stark in charge during the two days he and Phillipa would be away for the wedding.

"I'll see that everything keeps running smoothly," Stark reassured him as they hauled wagonloads of wood to the storage houses.

"I know you will."

"Lord Luther, I don't exactly know how to say this, but I'm glad you're here. It's almost like having your father back again. He was a stern man, but a good one. So are you."

Luther smiled slightly. "Thank you, Stark. I'm glad you weren't driven away by what's happened."

"Though I hate to say it, your brother has it in him to be a good man too. Whatever he's like now is nothing like the man who has been running Lawton Orchards these past few years. I hope he comes to his senses."

"So do I," Luther admitted.

The following day, Luther had just returned from making a business deal in the tropics when Leticia rode out to the field where he was cooling down. She edged her horse alongside him and said, "Linton's back. He returned this morning, drunk. He's sleeping it off."

"Is he?" Luther's anger rose. "It's about time."

"Luther, you wouldn't..." Leticia glanced at him with a worried look in her eyes.

"What?"

"You wouldn't hurt him would you? Physically I mean. I know your temper and I know Linton's but he's no match for you."

"I'm not going to hurt him but he's going to need to make a decision and it better be the right one."

Luther didn't trust himself at the moment to keep his promise not to hurt Linton for the way he'd misused his authority. He knew his first impulse upon seeing his younger brother would be to punch him in the nose, so after cooling down he went to the storehouses to take inventory.

It was after dark and the workers had already gone home to their families yet Luther remained working by lantern light.

The storage room door opened and Linton stepped inside.

"So the great warrior has graced us with his presence," Linton slurred. A bottle of wine dangled from his fingers.

Anger coiled like a snake inside Luther's belly but he forced himself to remain calm. "I'm working, Linton. Cleaning up your mess. I suggest you sober up and then we can talk."

"Oh can we? Who asked you to clean up my mess?"

"Our mother."

"The old bitch," Linton hissed.

Luther's gaze snapped in his direction.

"Don't look so offended," Linton said. "You hate her as much as I do. What I don't understand is why you bothered coming back. You got what you wanted. Cut off from the family. A Fighting Carrier hero."

Luther could scarcely believe what he was hearing. He and Linton had always gotten along well. Was it the wine talking or did Linton harbor such bad feelings toward him?

"And you wanted to lead this family," Luther said. "What happened?"

"What do you care?" Linton took a long sip from the bottle.

"I'm here aren't I?"

"Not to help us. This is just another way to look like a hero. Father's dead now, Luther, so it doesn't matter."

"What?" Luther approached, his anger toward Linton now tempered by pity. This was a side of his brother he'd never seen before or imagined existed.

"You heard me."

"I don't know what your problem is, Linton, but if you want to remain at Lawton Orchards you'll clean yourself up and get serious about running the family business."

Linton's bloodshot blue eyes glared into Luther's and he spoke through gritted teeth. "Who the hell are you to threaten to throw me out of my home? You don't belong here, Luther. You turned your back on all this, remember? Gave it up to be a Fighting Carrier and now you're even marrying common stock. A pretty raven-haired bitch."

Luther knocked the bottle from Linton's hand and it shattered on the stone floor. He grasped his brother by the throat and pinned him to the wall. "Never talk about her like that. I don't give a damn what you say about this family or Lavinia but if you ever disrespect Phillipa again I will break your fucking neck."

"Go ahead. Put me out of my misery."

"You're the only one who can do that." Luther released him. "By cleaning yourself up."

"Myself? When did I ever have a chance to be myself? I tried to do what was right for this family but all Father ever talked about was you. What a great competitor you were. How you became a Fighting Carrier. A real warrior. Luther's so intelligent. Luther's so fast, so strong, so courageous. I was sick to death of hearing about you."

Luther stared at Linton, dumfounded.

"I tried to be everything they wanted you to be. Do you have any idea what I gave up for this family?" Linton demanded. "Do you?"

"If you gave up anything, Linton, it wasn't for the family. It was because you wanted the power and wealth that comes with being a Woodfield-Shire."

"You even got some of that when Father died. Wealth that belonged to the Woodfield-Shires."

"I am a Woodfield-Shire."

"No I am! I did everything the family demanded of me. While you're planning to marry your dream lover I had to give up mine."

"Did you get one of our workers' daughters pregnant?"

Linton snorted. "Heard that rumor already have you? Not that it's any of your business but no I did not get her pregnant."

"But you loved her didn't you? She was the dream lover you're talking about."

"Yes." Linton closed his eyes for a long moment. "She was. But as mother reminded me I could not marry a commoner."

Luther's brow furrowed. "I don't understand why you gave her up then decided to destroy the business after you sacrificed so much."

"Because I realized too late that I made a mistake. Nothing is worth denying the dreams. Nothing."

"Then take her back instead of torturing yourself and destroying dozens of other lives in the process."

"She won't have me." Linton sighed deeply.

"I don't blame her if this is how you've been looking and acting. Pull yourself together, Linton. Be a fucking man and take your place as head of this family. Show your dream lover you belong together. It's about time someone break the tradition of the close bloodlines. That kind of breeding hasn't helped any of us as far as I can see."

"You're right. It's just the other families —"

"Do you want them to dictate your entire life?"

"No."

"Then do what you have to do."

"But I've ruined everything. The business. Everything."

"We'll sort it out. We've already started."

"Not we. You."

"I'm not staying, Linton. As you so tactfully pointed out I'm a Fighting Carrier. For heaven's sake this family needs you."

"Nobody ever needed me."

"Lawton Orchards fell apart without you so prior to that you must have been doing something right."

Linton glanced at Luther, a spark of his old self in his eyes. "You think I could get her back?"

"Not like this. You smell like a vat of wine. Cheap wine."

Linton gave a snort of laughter. "But if I cleaned up?"

"Of course."

"Luther, I...I'm sorry for insulting you and your mate. Thank you for getting things started here. I have no right to ask, but will you help me?"

"That's why I'm here."

"I did it on purpose you know." Linton shook his head and cast his gaze to his feet. "I tried to destroy Lawton Orchards to get back at mother. By hurting the business and dropping out of the Classics Competitions I was hurting her."

"And the staff and Leticia."

"I know," Linton murmured, shaking his head. "I'm a selfish, spoiled bastard, Luther. It's hard to change."

"But not impossible."

"No."

"I'll give you one chance, Linton. Don't waste it."

"I won't. I swear."

Chapter Fourteen

Winter Wedding

The morning of Luther and Phillipa's wedding, the couple flew to Hornview. Since they had been detained at Lawton Orchards, their friends in Hornview had been kind enough to plan the celebration that would follow the marriage ritual.

By the time they landed, some of the guests had already arrived and enjoyed the Chieftain's hospitality at the longhouse or relaxed at the local tavern. After speaking briefly with the Chieftain about the ceremony, Luther flew Phillipa to Inez and Terra's so she could prepare for the wedding.

Sophia, whom Phillipa had hired to make her gown, already waited there to help her dress. Shortly before Terra and Zach were to fly them to the village for the ceremony, Phillipa stood in front of a mirror admiring her blue gown embellished with gold and white embroidered flowers. The color reflected the blue of her eyes and the square neckline revealed the tops of her full breasts.

"Sophia, you've outdone yourself on this dress," she said.

"It looks so lovely because a beautiful woman is wearing it," Sophia said.

"Luther is going to be mad with desire when he sees you," Inez told her. "And we'd better go before he thinks you've changed your mind."

They stepped outside where Terra and Zach stood, their full-coated bodies dark against the snow.

Terra approached with a smile and placed his hands on her shoulders. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you." Phillipa was glad Terra could share this day with her. If only her parents could have been there as well. She knew her father would have been glad to see her marry a great Fighting Carrier like Luther.

A short time later they arrived at the longhouse. All the guests sat at the long wooden tables in the main room. Luther's friends from the Fighting Carriers had kindly volunteered to fly the human guests to and from the wedding. Linton had carried Ada and the two sat near Lavinia who appeared stiff and formal, not a hint of a smile on her lips.

At least she had been treating Phillipa civilly without any of the snide remarks she had made on the first day she'd arrived at Lawton Orchards. She must have known Luther hadn't been bluffing when he said he'd leave the estate in a heartbeat if she didn't comply with his terms.

Phillipa couldn't help thinking it pathetic that a mother had to be threatened into appearing at her son's wedding. It also saddened her that Luther didn't truly want her there, but her presence simply proved he had won a longstanding battle of wills.

Glancing around the room, Phillipa also noticed Susana and Moor with Canyon, Twilight and Jill. They had offered to mind the children while Inez and Sophia had been busy helping Phillipa dress.

At another table Leticia sat with Basil. He had flown her to the wedding and been invited to stay. Phillipa couldn't help wondering if there was more between the two of them than just a rider and Horseman partnership. Several times at Lawton Orchards she had caught them looking at each other in a way that was less than professional.

"We'd better take our places," Inez said to Terra and the others then turned to Phillipa and kissed her cheek. "Good luck."

"Thank you," Phillipa replied, though her gaze now fixed on Luther who stood with the Chieftain by the hearth.

His long blond hair hung loose down his back and he wore a flowing black shirt with gold ties fastened loosely across his broad chest. Black breeches and boots hugged his long, sinewy legs. Gods he was handsome. They had been together for a while now but he still took her breath away.

She approached and he smiled at her.

Taking her hand, he whispered in her ear, "You look too lovely for words."

"So do you. Look handsome I mean."

"Now that we're all here we can begin," said the gravel-voiced Chieftain. He called for silence and the ceremony began.

Luther and Phillipa knelt facing one another by the hearth, their hands joined. The Chieftain placed pine wreaths adorned with white ribbons on their heads.

"This is a joining of hearts. A binding of souls. This is the beginning of two lives becoming one," the Chieftain said. "Phillipa, do you take Luther as yours now and always, to honor him above all others?"

She held Luther's gaze and said, "Yes I take Luther and will honor him above all others."

"Luther, do you take Phillipa as yours now and always, to honor her above all others?"

"Yes I take Phillipa and will honor her above all others," he stated, gripping her hands a bit tighter.

Warmth spread through her at the sensation.

"In the presence of all gathered here, let it be said that you are now husband and wife." The Chieftain smiled and rested a hand on their shoulders. "Luck and happiness to you both."

Luther cupped the back of her head and kissed her. Phillipa felt happier than ever. She and Luther exchanged a loving glance before they stood and smiled at their

cheering guests. The newlywed couple joined the Chieftain at his table and the celebration began.

For several hours everyone feasted and danced, except Lavinia who remained seated as if at a funeral instead of a wedding. She ate and drank little and spoke only when spoken to, though politely as if sensing Luther wouldn't accept anything less.

When the celebration ended and the guests dispersed, Phillipa and Luther flew to their house in Owlhill where they planned to spend the night before returning to Lawton Orchards.

It was dusk when they landed. While Luther unloaded his tack and groomed himself, Phillipa visited her horses then went to the house and built a fire. She undressed and carefully packed her gown into a trunk then shrugged on her robe and belted it loosely. Though she and Luther had made love many times in the past, tonight seemed different. Tonight they would lie together as husband and wife.

The door opened and Luther stepped inside. He closed the door behind him. The floor shook as he changed to Huform. Naked, his eyes gleaming with lust, he strode toward her, took her face in his hands and kissed her deeply.

"It feels so good to be completely alone with you away from Lawton Orchards," he said.

"Don't mention Lawton Orchards. Not tonight." Phillip embraced him tightly.

He'd been working so hard to save his family's business – they both had – and they needed time to relax and indulge their love.

"I couldn't agree more," he said.

He brushed his lips across her forehead while simultaneously unfastening her belt.

Her robe parted and he cupped her breasts. The feeling of his hands on her body thrilled her. She wanted him to kiss and touch every inch of her and she wanted to do the same to him in return.

Brushing aside her hair, he kissed her neck and pushed her robe off her shoulders and down her arms. Phillipa closed her eyes and sighed with pleasure. The robe pooled at her feet and she stepped closer to him. Her nipples brushed against his hair-dusted chest and stiffened to taut buds of desire. Luther's warm hands stroked her shoulders and caressed her back, moving down to cup her buttocks. Little quivers of pleasure raced through her. He tugged her closer still, trapping his hard cock between their bodies.

"Phillipa," he whispered against her lips. "My wife."

She smiled at his words, warmth spreading through her. Wrapping her arms around his waist, she opened her eyes to gaze into his and said, "Luther. My husband."

He kissed her again. His tongue traced the shape of her lips and thrust between them. With long, tender strokes he explored her mouth. Their tongues met in a sensual dance.

Phillipa pressed closer to him. She stroked his back, loving how his powerful muscles tightened and strained as passion grew. She gently pressed her fingertips down his spine. Upon reaching his lower back, she swiftly found his Turning Point. Luther groaned with pleasure. His cock stiffened even more and his breathing quickened.

She smiled, loving the power they had over each other, how they could bring such pleasure to one another with a kiss or a touch.

"Do you feel like riding?" he asked.

"Now?"

"Yes. Now." The lust in his eyes and the huskiness of his voice aroused her as much as the sensation of his hands on her body. He stepped away, walked to the bed and lay on his back. His hand curled around his cock and he stroked firmly. The sight of him pleasuring himself excited her so much that her clit ached and her pussy throbbed. Already she was hot, wet and so ready to feel his thickness deep inside her.

"I think I would like to ride," she said, staring at him with her most seductive look.

Their gazes locked, she straddled him. His hands rested on her hips then slid up her sides and finally cupped her breasts. He rolled his thumbs over her nipples, stimulating the pert nubs until she sighed with pleasure.

Phillipa grasped his staff, guided the swollen head to her pussy and lowered herself upon it. Gods it felt wonderful to be so full, his hard yet velvety flesh rubbing her in all the right places. She rocked upon him slowly at first, trying to prolong their pleasure, but she had been waiting all day for this moment. To make love with her husband.

By the smoldering look in his eyes, his eagerness matched hers. His hips lifted, meeting her rhythm and he gently squeezed her breasts as passion grew.

Her back arched and her entire body taut with need, she quickened her pace, riding him fast and hard.

"Phillipa, gods. I love you," he panted.

"I love you too. Oh I love you so much, Luther," she gasped. The orgasm built deep inside her. Every muscle cried out for release and she tingled from head to toe. Unable to keep her eyes open against the pleasure, she closed them tightly and rode him even faster. His hands clasped her waist and he groaned, a deep guttural sound that pushed her over the edge.

Her pussy clamped tightly around his cock, squeezing it in orgasmic pulsations. Arching her neck, she cried out, not even trying to control her moans and sobs of ultimate pleasure.

As her orgasm waned he pushed her onto her back, their bodies still tightly locked, and began thrusting into her with almost frenzied passion. Phillipa clung to him tightly, her fingers gripping the hard, straining muscles of his back and her legs wrapped around his lean waist. Another orgasm overtook her with surprising swiftness and such intensity it was almost painful.

"Luther! Oh gods. Oh Luther!" she cried.

He made a sound that was almost a growl and lunged into her fast and hard. His essence filled her and he collapsed atop her, his body hot and damp.

"I love you, Phillipa," he whispered in her ear.

"I love you too."

Her eyes closed, she enjoyed the feeling of his weight atop her and the rhythm of their mingling heartbeats.

* * * * *

The following days passed with surprising swiftness. True to his word, Linton stopped indulging in drinking, gambling and women. He worked alongside Luther and slowly began to earn back the trust of the workers. Though Lawton Orchards still had a long way to go before returning to its former glory, Luther's plans had the business well on its way to recovery.

He and Phillipa agreed to stay until he reenlisted in the Fighting Carriers in the spring. Knowing that Luther wouldn't always be there seemed to sober Linton completely which Luther took as a good sign. Linton's return also allowed Luther enough time to keep up his training with exercise flights so that he'd be in excellent shape when Gathering season started.

He had now completely recovered from his ordeal during that tragic Gathering. Having spent so much time at Lawton Orchards he was more eager than ever to return to the life he loved as a Fighting Carrier. This time everything would be even better because now he had Phillipa. He couldn't help feeling guilty keeping her away from her messenger service but she didn't seem to mind very much.

She'd actually been talking more and more about starting a family and delivering messages part time. Though he didn't want her to feel as if he was controlling her, he hoped she would agree to less messenger work.

Leticia and Basil trained harder than ever since the Winter Classics Competition would be starting soon. He knew his mother and Linton were happy that the Woodfield-Shire name would be represented at the Winter Classics even if it was only by Leticia as a rider. Linton had badly slacked off in his training this year but vowed to be ready to enter the Summer Classics.

Luther didn't doubt Linton would once again have their family well-known and respected in competition. He moved beautifully and was one of the most collected Horsemen Luther knew. If he'd been so inclined Linton probably would have made a good Fighting Carrier.

Yet just as it was in Luther's blood to fly Gatherings, it was in Linton's blood to head the family. Now that Linton had regained control of himself, Luther sensed he would remain on the straight and narrow. He didn't doubt that had partly to do with his brother's plan to win back his dream lover.

Two nights before the Winter Classics, Luther, Phillipa, Linton and Lavinia were eating dinner in the great hall when Leticia entered looking upset. Dirt stained her white cloak and breeches.

"What happened?" Luther demanded.

"Basil sprained his wing and we crash-landed."

"What?" Luther stood, as did Phillipa and Linton.

"Are you all right?" Linton asked.

"Come here and sit down." Phillipa pulled out a chair.

"I'm fine. Just a bump or two. But Basil has had to withdraw from the competition." Leticia sat in the chair and rubbed her temples.

"That means no one will be representing our family in the competition," Lavinia said.

Linton cast her a disgusted look. "Really, Mother, what matters most is that Leticia wasn't seriously hurt and Basil will recover."

"He'll recover," Leticia said. "The healer told him it could take up to a week though. And Mother is right. Our family should be represented in some way. Linton, do you think you could —"

"No." Linton shook his head. "I'm out of condition. I'll be ready for the Summer Classics but if I entered now I'd probably make a fool of myself."

"I doubt that," Lavinia said. "On your worst day you're better than most of those other competitors on their best."

"That's an exaggeration," Linton said.

"What about you?" Lavinia glanced at Luther.

"I haven't competed in eighteen years."

"But you could do it." Leticia held his gaze. "You're a Fighting Carrier and the Classics are derived from exercises of the Fighting Carriers."

"You said yourself that you chose to stop the competitions because you wanted the real thing in the Fighting Carriers," Lavinia said. "You could do it, Luther. You inherited your father's strength and grace."

"And I've seen you training. You're in excellent condition," Linton added.

Luther had never intended to return to the Classics. To him it was nothing more than a bunch of pompous fools mimicking the most respected warriors of their species. Still he knew that in social circles of the old bloodlines it was important in keeping a family's respect among their peers.

He glanced at Phillipa, curious to hear her opinion.

"I know how you feel about the Classics, Luther," she said, a slight smile on her lips, "but I have to admit I'd like to see you compete, even if it's only once."

"I assume you'll be riding me?" Luther asked Leticia.

"Haven't I always?" she said, a teasing look in her eyes. "How do you expect to place well without me?"

"You are a brat." He chuckled. "All right. I'll do it. But this is the last time."

"Don't worry. If you decided to make a habit of it we'd only be competing against each other and we've already had enough of that." Linton grinned then his expression became serious and he said, "Thank you, Luther. I owe you."

"Perhaps one day I'll collect."

"At any time, brother."

Luther sighed. Two days to practice for a competition that generally took months, even years, of preparation. Yet if he was ready for Gathering season this should be a snap. Except for the stupid regulations of course and the stuck-up judges who would probably hate him on sight since he was a Fighting Carrier. Knowing he represented his beloved organization actually meant more to him than representing the Woodfield-Shire line. And Phillipa would be watching as well.

Suddenly he felt a hint of desire for the competition. For the first and only time he might actually enjoy it.

* * * * *

Over the next two days Luther and Leticia trained for the Classics while Linton assumed complete control of the business end of Lawton Orchards. Phillipa spent her time either working with the women in the great hall or watching Luther and his sister train.

She had to admit she could hardly wait to see him compete. He was so strong and graceful that she couldn't imagine any Horseman performing better than him. At night when they lay in bed she read over the competition rules with him. According to Luther there had been few changes over the years.

The competition lasted for three days during which judges scored the Horsemen and riders in gaits, airs, jumps, flight and fighting skills. No actual combat occurred but the pair was judged on how they worked together when engaged in swordplay. The judges scored the riders on how well they moved with their Horsemen and the Horsemen were scored on strength, stamina and style.

The rules were very specific in the appearance of both Horseman and rider. Any Horseman with long hair must wear it plaited. No adornments allowed. Horseman and rider were required to wear either blue or black gloves and the rider's tunic, breeches and cloak must be of blue or black. Most competitors chose black but Luther and Leticia selected blue.

When the first day of the Winter Classics finally arrived, they traveled to a neutral field where the competition always took place. A tack house and longhouse had been built there to provide comfort for competitors and guests. A short time before the

competition began Phillipa stood in Luther's stall watching while a professional groom prepared him.

A small rather quiet man, the groom moved with efficiency. He did his job well and by the time he'd finished, Luther's full-coated body practically gleamed from the vigorous brushing.

His long blond hair was braided tightly down his man-back and his tail had been neatly trimmed and brushed so that it cascaded, veil-like behind him. Phillipa noted that he carried it high and proud. A polished black harness swathed his man-torso and a light black riding saddle and blanket rested on his back. His gloves, a slightly darker shade than his eyes, matched Leticia's attire.

Finally the groom left them alone and Luther glanced behind him. "Did he cut my tail too short? He's groomed me before and can be a bit scissor-happy."

"No. It's perfect." Phillipa approached and rested a hand lightly on his man-chest. "You're perfect."

"Far from it." He chuckled and took her in his arms, his gaze fixed on her. "But as long as you think so I won't argue."

Before she could come up with a proper retort, he bent and kissed her.

"All right that's enough," Leticia teased, stepping into the stall.

Phillipa turned to her, noting that she looked lovely in her impeccable blue shirt, breeches and cloak. Her hair was also plaited.

"Luther get rid of those silly earrings before we're disqualified," Leticia said.

He reached up and felt the tip of his pointed ear where the gold hoop and sapphire stud rested.

"Damn. I forgot about that," he said and removed the jewelry. He handed the earrings to Phillipa. "Hold these for me will you, love?"

"Don't expect to get them back," she teased, removing the silver hoops from her own pierced ears and replacing them with Luther's earrings. Something about wearing jewelry that was still warm from his body seemed so intimate. "Good luck. Both of you."

Leticia smiled. "Thank you."

Luther wrapped an arm around Phillipa's waist and tugged her closer. "Give me a kiss for luck."

Without hesitation she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her lips to his. When he released her they held each other's gaze for a long moment.

"We'd better go warm up," Leticia suggested. Outside the tack house, she mounted him and they trotted toward the field where other competitors already warmed up.

Phillipa took her place by one of the many bonfires around the field where onlookers gathered to keep warm. Today's tests included gaits and airs. She watched Luther for several moments before finally tearing her gaze from him to look over his competition. All were impeccably groomed, lean and fit. In spite of the many attractive

Horsemen present, none looked as magnificent as Luther – her snow white stallion with elfin eyes and the strength of a Fighting Carrier.

A short time later the judges took their places on a raised platform and a servant blew a trumpet, signaling the competition was about to begin. The competitors lined up outside the fenced-in arena that had been cleared of snow. Each Horseman had been assigned a number to indicate the order in which they would compete. Since Luther had drawn a high number, he would be among the last to perform.

Phillipa watched as each Horseman and rider took turns circling the arena, displaying their gaits and airs while the judges scored them on stamina, style and ability to work with their rider.

Phillipa had learned that Horsemen simply didn't represent themselves, but individual families. Some families chose to enter a different Horseman for each day of the competition while others, like the Woodfield-Shires, used one outstanding Horseman for all events.

Though each performed the same movements in the same order, some easily outshone the others. Among the best were a cremello, Talbert Ironhill-Lakes, a palomino, Shelby Thorley-Terris and Luther.

During Luther's performance Phillipa couldn't help being impressed by the way he and Leticia worked so well together. Maybe all their previous years of competition helped, but they moved almost as if they were extensions of each other. His powerful yet graceful gaits distinguished him among the other competitors.

Rather than wearing the stern almost miserable looks of the other Horsemen and riders, Luther wore a relaxed, pleasant expression. The judges didn't seem to appreciate this and looked at him with distaste. Phillipa couldn't understand how the other competitors' stiff mimicking of military sternness gained the favor of the judges but there was little she understood about the attitude of old bloodlines.

Though she didn't know much about the Classics, Phillipa did recognize a champion Horseman when she saw one. She didn't doubt Luther would place well in spite of his unconventional attitude.

When the events of the day ended, Phillipa met him at the tack house where the groom helped him remove his tack. Upon seeing Phillipa, he dismissed the groom who took his saddle and harness away for polishing.

"Hello, love." Luther brushed a kiss across her lips.

"You were wonderful," she said, stroking his man-chest. In spite of the intensity of the final round of events, he felt only slightly hot and had scarcely broken a sweat. "You should win."

He chuckled. "Just a little biased are you?"

"No." She lifted her chin. "I know enough about Horsemen to recognize a great one."

"Your opinion is the only one that matters to me anyway." He kissed her again. "I'm going to cool down."

"I'll join you."

"Are you certain you're not too cold? You've been outside for a couple of hours watching the competition."

"I've been standing by one of the bonfires so I'm warm enough."

They left the tack house and walked over the snowy field where other competitors also cooled down. Some glanced in their direction and she knew why. Throughout the day she had been the object of curious glances and whispers. Rumors had spread that the rebellious Luther Woodfield-Shire had married a commoner.

Though she appreciated Luther's performance, Phillipa could scarcely wait to leave this group of insincere, snobbish people.

* * * * *

The next day's competition included jumps as well as a sword display. The Horsemen and riders wielded their weapons in synchronized movements mimicking battle. Luther and Leticia outshone all others in this event, particularly during the event when he fought while in a raised or rearing position.

Few Horsemen, even at this level of competition, had the strength to perform such movements for any length of time without losing precision. Several Horsemen were disqualified during this event while others withdrew due to injuries. Luther performed flawlessly, without any sign of fatigue though Phillipa knew he must have felt at least some muscle strain.

His years as a Fighting Carrier provided him with superior concentration, strength and stamina and his performance throughout all the events revealed the difference between Classics competitors and an experienced Fighting Carrier.

At the end of the second day Luther and Talbert Ironhill-Lakes were vying for first place.

"Talbert is good but Luther is better," Leticia said over dinner in the great hall that night. "The only thing that might keep the judges from choosing Luther as the winner is their bias against Fighting Carriers."

"Among other things," Lavinia muttered.

Phillipa knew what she meant. Though the other royal families didn't openly ridicule his marriage to Phillipa, rumor had it they disapproved. Not that she or Luther cared what they thought, but their gossip no doubt ate up Lavinia.

"Mother, don't start," Linton said.

"Oh she won't." Luther glanced at Lavinia. "We've already been through this. Haven't we, Mother?"

Lavinia's lips pursed but she continued eating without further comment.

Partway through the meal someone knocked on the front door. A moment later, Niles appeared followed by Wilder. Sweat dampened the blood bay Fighting Carrier's coat and he wore a serious expression that worried Phillipa.

"What's wrong?" Luther demanded. He stood and approached his friend.

"Here." Wilder handed Luther a slip of parchment. "There's trouble on the southern coast."

"Tropical storm blowing in from the South. Horseman scouts have spotted it." Luther murmured as he quickly read the message. He turned to Phillipa and his family. "I need to go. This storm is headed for the Kora Islands. When it hits they'll most likely be destroyed. Several of the coastal villages are also in danger so they need all available Horsemen to help evacuate. Also any civilians, human or Horseman, who can lend a hand because there have already been casualties from places the storm has hit."

"I'm with you." Phillipa stood.

"So am I," Leticia said.

"Are you all mad?" Lavinia snapped. "What has the southern coast to do with us? You're in the middle of a competition—"

"Competition?" Luther narrowed his eyes. "We're talking about people's lives. Even if I didn't want to lend aid, which I do, I'm still a Fighting Carrier. These are my orders."

"I'll join you." Linton stood and approached Luther.

"No. You're needed here to keep Lawton Orchards running. We've come a long way but this place still needs leadership badly. Your place is here, Linton."

"Then at least ask if some of our workers will volunteer to fly with you to help."

"I'll do that."

"If there's anything else you need from us, don't hesitate to send a message."

Luther nodded and turned back to Wilder. "Why don't you take a rest and we'll fly out together?"

The other Fighting Carrier agreed and excused himself to cool down while Luther strode out of the great hall.

Phillipa and Leticia chased after him.

"We're still coming with you," Phillipa said.

His first impulse was to protest. The last thing he wanted was the two women he cared most about to follow him into a dangerous assignment, but he knew neither would do as he told them and stay behind. And from the message he'd received from General Sota, those dwelling on the southern coast needed as much help as they could get.

"Hurry and get ready then," Luther said.

A short time later he left with Phillipa on his back. Wilder, who carried Leticia, flew beside them and ten volunteers from among Lawton Orchard's workers followed behind.

Chapter Fifteen

The Measure of a Horseman

Later that night Luther and his group landed in Larkville, one of the largest settlements near the southern coast that could withstand the approaching storm. Other villages had also taken evacuees but were now filled.

Torches and bonfires lit Larkville square and the streets bustled with activity so that it seemed more like midday than night. Horsemen and humans hurried to and from the longhouse, infirmary, storage and tack houses.

Luther caught sight of many familiar faces from the Fighting Carriers who had come to assist. Terra and Moor were already there and working among the Horsemen flying humans from the Kora Islands to safety.

"Glad to see you brought more help." Terra clapped Luther on the back and glanced at the workers from Lawton Orchards. Then he turned to Phillipa and Leticia. "If you ladies go to the infirmary, I know they need help. Inez is there, Phillipa, and so is Maria."

"Luther!" a woman shouted. He turned to Janelle who strode toward them from a storage house.

"Hello," Luther said.

"Good. You brought more help," the Gatherer said. "We can use it. This has got to be your fiancée." Janelle extended her hand to Phillipa who glanced at her with curiosity.

"Yes this is Phillipa. She's my wife now."

Janelle grinned. "So you got hitched to the Horseman early."

"And you are?" Phillipa asked.

"Janelle. I rode Luther on the Gatherings in Whitewood Cove."

"Oh yes. He'd mentioned something about that," Phillipa said and Luther bit back laughter. After all they'd been through she was still a bit jealous of him having a female Gatherer on his back. Oddly it made him feel rather good.

"And you?" Janelle asked Leticia.

"I'm Luther's sister. If you point us in the direction of the infirmary we'll get to work."

"I like that attitude." Janelle grinned. "Follow me, ladies. I was just on my way to the infirmary."

Phillipa and Luther exchanged an affectionate glance before she and the other women walked away.

Terra and Luther strode toward the tack house.

"You and your group can start making evacuation flights as soon as possible," Terra said. "A bunch of us have been flying since late this afternoon and need relief. My damn wings are killing me. It's been nonstop."

"I'm ready to go," Luther said.

"We've also been bringing people in from some of the overly packed villages. Not only that, once the storm hits the Kora Islands there's going to be nothing left. We'll have to find homes for these people until they can relocate. As it is this village is almost filled and it's the biggest in the area."

"I'll speak to the village chieftain and arrange for evacuees to be sent to Lawton Orchards. We have room."

"I thought things were tight there? Financially I mean."

"They are but we're not so desperate that we can't put up some families. We'll also be hiring soon, so some might decide to stay. I'll send word to my brother, Linton, that guests will be coming."

"Excellent. You're ready to take over leading the rescue flights then?"

"Yes. Go find something to do that takes a little less wing work." Luther smiled.

"I'm going to help reinforce the buildings for when the storm hits. Hopefully it will lose power by the time it gets to us but we can't be too careful. I'll relieve you as flight leader in the morning."

Luther nodded and Terra jogged away. Moments later Luther left on the first of many flights to the Kora Islands. The weather on the southern coast was milder than in the North, so a full-coat wasn't necessary. Unfortunately the Kora Islands bordered the tropics so half the flight was through sweltering heat.

To ensure everyone was evacuated by the time the storm hit, Horsemen needed to travel quickly and with little time to rest between flights. Luther made certain he kept an ample supply of moss smoke easily accessible in the pouch around his neck because sometimes in mid-flight he needed an additional dose.

By midmorning Luther had lost count of how many flights he'd made. When Terra came to relieve him, he was more than ready. After cooling down and switching to Huform he went to the infirmary to lend aid there and hopefully see Phillipa, if even for a moment.

Seconds after he stepped into the infirmary, she approached and hugged him tightly. "Luther."

"How are things going, love?"

"Luckily there haven't been many newly injured people and nothing too severe. Just some accidents with villagers who panicked during the evacuations and Horsemen suffering from muscle strain and overheating. Speaking of that, how are you? You look tired."

A slight smile touched his lips and he caressed her face. "So do you actually. It's been busy but if things keep going well everyone will be evacuated in time."

"I don't know how you Horsemen are managing to outrun that storm."

"The last scout that checked on the storm's whereabouts said it hasn't changed course and is moving faster than ever."

"By the way, Leticia went with one of the healers to Greenthorne, that village a few miles east of here. They're overcrowded with wounded people and short on help. Basil took them."

"Basil? What's he doing here? I thought he was injured."

"He's still healing but when he heard from Linton that Leticia was here, he came with several workers from the Norwood-Perry estate. His wing is still pretty sore so he's carrying them over land instead of in flight."

"Good. I wouldn't want him crashing with riders on his back, especially when Leticia is one of them. It was nice of him to show up though."

"Yes. It was. Between you and me I think he and Leticia are more than friends."

Luther snorted. "That's obvious. At least if she marries him Mother won't be able to complain. He's not a Woodfield-Shire but he's of an old bloodline. Now what can I do to help around here?"

"Maria is the healer in charge. She and her husband weren't there when you visited, but they live in Hornview. You probably met her husband Linn. A big buckskin Fighting Carrier. He's here too."

"Oh yes. I met him earlier. Student of Terra. Large wingspan." Luther held out his arms.

Phillipa guided Luther across the infirmary to where a petite red-haired woman stood mixing medicine at a table laden with dried herbs, potions and powders.

"Maria, we have another pair of hands. My husband Luther."

The healer glanced up and smiled. "Luther. Great. We can use the help. At the moment we don't have any severely sick or injured but we can use someone to change bandages and distribute food and also make space for the evacuees still coming in."

"I'll get to it," Luther said, glancing at Phillipa with an affectionate smile before they parted ways to go about their work.

By midday word passed that no more flights would be taken to the Kora Islands as the storm would soon reach them. Luckily everyone had been evacuated and Larkville was secured against the storm.

Luther had just returned from carrying humans from an overcrowded village several miles away and was preparing to return for others when Maria shouted to him and approached, a worried-looking girl beside her.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"My mother and sister are still on the island, Sir," said the girl.

Luther's brow furrowed. "You're sure? There have been many people rescued. Have you checked the longhouse?"

"They're still there! I was with the last group of Horsemen sent to evacuate us. My sister had run off and my mother went looking for her. The Horseman who said he'd stay behind to look for them has just returned. He said he couldn't find them."

"The storm was starting to hit and he couldn't stay any longer to look," Maria explained. "I said there's nothing we can do but she insisted on speaking to a lead Fighting Carrier."

Luther glanced skyward. In spite of the clear day, he, like all Horsemen, could sense the coming storm. If there was even the slightest chance of rescuing this girl's mother and sister, he needed to leave immediately.

"Which island and what's your location on it?" Luther asked and the girl replied.

"I'll see if I can find them," Luther told her.

"Thank you, Sir. Thank you." The girl grasped his arm.

He nodded abruptly and headed for the well to refill his water flask so he could take another dose of moss smoke. Maria joined him, alone this time.

"Luther, what if her family was picked up by another Horseman? They might not even be there," she said.

He met her gaze. "And what if they are? From what the scouts have said those islands are going to be destroyed in the storm. They're talking about hundred-foot waves and tornados."

"I know," Maria said. "Just be careful. Do you want me to send Phillipa to you?"

Luther knew why she asked, but he shook his head. "No. I have to leave right now and don't worry I have no intention of getting myself killed."

He swallowed the moss smoke, refilled his water flask a second time and placed it around his neck along with the pouch of herbs.

"Maria," he said as she turned away. She glanced back at him. "If by chance I don't come back tell her I love her."

The healer nodded, her eyes locked with his for a moment before she hurried toward the longhouse.

Luther called to one of the lower-ranking Fighting Carriers. The youth jogged over.

"I need to take one more flight to the Kora Islands. Two people are missing."

The younger Horseman looked skeptical. "Flying there now is dangerous. The last scout said the storm has just about reached the islands. By the time you get there—"

"I know."

"Fly fast."

Luther nodded. Seconds later he soared at top speed toward the Kora Islands. The clear weather soon turned to rain and strong winds. Unfortunately both were warm in

the uncomfortably hot tropical weather. The speed of his flight combined with the heat would have undoubtedly killed him if not for the moss smoke.

When he reached the island where the girl's mother and sister were stranded, the wind grew so powerful he could scarcely keep his flight pattern straight. Heavy rain lashed his eyes and he squinted as he flew low, trying to see any sign of life. Most likely the humans had taken shelter, probably realizing that no other Horsemen would come now that the storm had hit.

Then he saw smoke rising from a chimney in the village square and, his heart pounding with anticipation, he landed near the house. The door was locked so he forced it open, knocking it half off the hinges.

A woman screamed and reached for a girl of about six. Both stared at him with wide eyes. The girl's arm was wrapped in a bloody bandage.

"I'm Luther. A Fighting Carrier." He approached, knelt and examined the girl's arm. The dressing would hold but she needed to see a healer.

"I thought no one was coming back," the woman said. "My daughter's arm is broken. She had an accident earlier and fell. That's why I had to go looking for her."

"Your older daughter said you were missing," Luther explained and knelt so they could easily mount him.

The girl began to cry and he felt a twinge of sympathy. No doubt her wounded arm hurt badly.

"Hang on tight." Luther left the shelter and glanced skyward. He cursed softly upon seeing an enormous funnel cloud in the distance.

"Gods," the woman breathed. "We're going to die."

"No we're not," Luther said and took off at a gallop from which he quickly ascended.

High in the sky, he raced through the storm and soon they flew over the sea. A great gust of wind sent Luther spinning in a somersault. The little girl screamed and fell off his back.

"Lissa!" the mother cried and jumped off after her daughter.

Why do these things happen to me? In the space of a heartbeat Luther took a nosedive and caught first the mother then the daughter. Still screaming, they clung to him. The woman had a fierce hold on the strap around his neck that held his pouch of moss smoke. In her terror she pulled so hard upon it that it broke and the pouch fell into the violent waves.

"Oh shit," Luther muttered, fear coiling in his gut. No doubt that with the heat, speed to out-fly the storm and the length of the flight, he'd need more moss smoke soon.

"You need to get on my back," Luther said. "I'll help guide you with my arm."

"I can't do it," the woman said.

"You have to. I can't make this flight with you in my arms instead of on my back. Don't look down and don't let go and you'll be fine."

After several uncomfortable moments, the woman and child made it onto his back. Luther glanced behind him and saw the storm closing in rapidly.

"Do *not* let go," he ordered, waited until they clung tightly then surged forward with a blinding rush of speed.

He flew with the same single-mindedness as he had during that horrible Gathering when he'd lost all but one of his companions. Halfway through the flight he felt the telltale signs of severe overheating and wished for the moss smoke. If only he could keep it together until they reached Larkville.

Unfortunately there were no villages between here and there for him to stop and no place that would provide suitable shelter for when the storm hit. If there had been, he could have landed and cooled down while they waited out the storm. With the storm so close on his tail, there was no way he could slow his pace. He also remembered the little girl needed a healer. He had no choice but to fly to Larkville.

Throughout the flight his body temperature rose to dangerous heights. His head throbbed and he fought against waves of nausea.

"Are you all right?" the woman called above the wind.

"No," he managed to reply.

"Gods are you going to fall?"

"Let's hope not," he said.

"You're overheating aren't you?"

"Yes. Don't worry," he vowed. "I'll get us to safety."

The woman fell silent, as if understanding that he needed to conserve his strength and focus solely on flying.

Luther concentrated on Phillipa. He thought of holding her again, hearing her voice. Their life together had just begun and he had no intention of giving it up now. He'd flown through worse situations. If he could hold out a little longer, he and Phillipa would be together again and his passengers would be safe.

By the time he neared the Running Way at Larkville he was so dizzy that he wondered if he'd be able to land. In fact he wondered if he even saw the Running Way or if it was a figment of his imagination. His heart throbbed painfully and his breath came in ragged sobs yet somehow he managed to land on his feet.

He felt his passengers dismount quickly. Someone called his name but he wasn't sure who. The entire world spun. On trembling legs he took several steps then everything went black.

* * * * *

Luther awoke shivering with cold. His bleary eyes opened halfway and he heard a trickling sound, like melting ice. Then he remembered that was impossible since they were near the southern coast.

"Luther." Phillipa's voice penetrated his fuzzy mind and he felt a gentle hand stroking his face and hair.

He turned his head just enough to focus on her and smiled slightly. "Hello."

"Oh Luther." She leaned closer and brushed his forehead and cheeks with feather soft kisses.

As he came more fully to awareness he realized he lay covered in ice on a cot.

"What the hell is this?" he said, annoyed by how weak and shaky he sounded.

"You nearly died from heatstroke, that's what this is," she said.

"Ah. He's awake."

Luther glanced at Maria who bent and touched his forehead. "Much better. How are you feeling?"

"Like I'm freezing to death," he replied, his teeth chattering.

"I want you to stay packed in ice for a bit longer," Maria said. "Good thing the village had an underground icehouse or else I don't know how we would have managed to cool you down fast enough. Phillipa said you take moss smoke. Why didn't you have it with you on the flight?"

"It's a long story."

"After you've rested I'm sure we'll all like to hear it," Phillipa said, trying to sound scolding but it didn't quite work. Not when she stared at him with so much love in her eyes.

"The woman and child?" he asked.

"Both fine. They've been asking about you."

He nodded and closed his eyes again though it proved difficult to rest while shivering like he'd just landed in the Spikelands.

"I could thrash you for risking your life like that," Phillipa said, taking his hand. He tightened his grip on her and she leaned closer and kissed him. "I am so proud of you, Luther. I'm proud to be the wife of such a great Fighting Carrier."

One of his secret desires had been for someone he cared about to tell him that. Knowing those words had been spoken by the woman who meant more to him than anyone else made them sweeter than he'd ever imagined.

"I love you, Phillipa," he said.

"I love you too, Luther. With all my heart. Forever."

* * * * *

Luther recovered quickly and a few days later he and Phillipa headed home along with the workers from Lawton Orchards, Basil and Leticia. Linton had welcomed several evacuee families and offered them jobs which most accepted.

Since Luther had withdrawn from the Winter Classics, Talbert Ironhill-Lakes had swept the competition, much to Lavinia's dismay. The blow was softened somewhat when, throughout the rest of the winter, Lawton Orchards continued to thrive. By spring it was well on its way to surpassing its old standards and Linton, who remained sober, continued running the business with a firm yet compassionate hand.

If the experience in Larkville had taught Luther anything it was that he was and would always be a Fighting Carrier. No family business or Classics Competition could make him feel as complete as when he served his beloved organization. The only feeling that surpassed that was the love he felt for Phillipa.

In early spring they moved back to Owlhill and Luther reenlisted. He was stationed in Penrose, the small Gathering village near Owlhill, but would also be on call to assist in Hornview.

Phillipa resumed her messenger service but only part-time. The new messenger who had taken over for her while she'd been at Lawton Orchards was glad for the opportunity to serve as the village's main messenger. Strangely Phillipa didn't seem to mind giving up some of her freedom. Perhaps she realized it wasn't giving up work, but becoming a partner in their household, especially now that they were trying harder than ever to conceive that elusive Horseman child.

The night he returned from his first Gathering of the season, rather than feel tired he was filled with excitement. The rush of a good Gathering seemed to incite his appetite in every direction and he could scarcely wait to get home to dinner and his beautiful wife.

When he stepped in the door, he caught the delicious scent of succulent stew, grass and clover salad—a Horseman's delicacy—and apple bread. Next he noticed the house was not only spotlessly clean but the bed was sprinkled with rose petals. Then he saw something that made him forget completely about all else.

Phillipa stepped from behind her dressing screen, completely naked. Her long black hair, brushed until it gleamed, hung loose down her back and over her shoulders. Her gorgeous breasts seemed fuller than ever, the tips crowned with pink, berrylike nipples.

Gods she was beautiful. The sight of her took his breath away quicker than a nonstop flight to the Spikelands and back.

"Phillipa, gods," he said in a husky voice, strode toward her and took her in his arms.

She held him tightly and returned his kiss with fervor, her warm, wet tongue stroking his. Her fingers threaded through his hair and she pressed her smooth, rounded body closer to his.

When the kiss broke he stared into her eyes, pleased to see she looked as aroused as he felt. And something else shone in her expression. Something deeper.

"Luther."

"Yes, love." He caressed her back and buttocks with long, slow sweeps of his hands. Leaning closer he took her earlobe between his teeth and nibbled it gently.

"We did it."

"Did what?" he murmured, his eyes slipping shut as he kissed her neck and shoulder, loving the feeling of her warm skin against his lips. His hand trailed over her hip and —

His head shot up and he stared into her eyes. She smiled, an almost teasing curve of her lips, and nodded, making his heart skip a beat.

"We did it?" he asked. "You're —"

"Due in early autumn."

"Phillipa!" He chuckled, embraced her tightly and lifted her off her feet. He placed a smacking kiss on her lips then released her gently. "Sorry. I probably shouldn't be swinging you around like that."

"On the contrary I hope you keep swinging me around until I'm too fat for you to lift."

"Never," he said, taking her hands in his and gazing into her eyes with all the tenderness he felt. "Gods I love you."

"I love you too. Just promise me one thing, Luther."

"Anything."

"That we do *not* give our child an *L* name."

He laughed. "We can name him anything you like. Or her."

"Do you have a preference?"

"Only for a happy, healthy child who, gods willing, won't need to use moss smoke or pond seed or any of that trash."

"Even if he does he has a wonderful example of a Horseman who let nothing stop him from being one of the greatest Fighting Carriers in the world."

"I wouldn't go quite that far."

"I would. You are to me. After all, you saved my life."

He wrapped an arm around her waist, buried a hand in her hair and held her gaze. "And you saved me in more ways than you know."

"Luther?"

"Yes."

"Let's eat."

"Agreed. I'm absolutely starving and I'm about to eat a lovely meal." He swept her into his arms, carried her to bed and did just that.

About the Author

Kate Hill is a thirty-something vegetarian New Englander who likes heroes with a touch of something wicked and wild. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in publications both on and off the Internet. When she's not working on her books, Kate enjoys reading, working out, and researching vampires and Viking history.

Kate welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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