

Anima

Anima

By

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Chapter One

The Nightmare, the rite and the deadly fight

JOYCE

Joyce blinked a few times, but the scene in front of her of a forest of twisted trees under an indigo moonlit sky was impossible, so she closed her eyes and tried to wake up. She opened her eyes again, but now her view was blocked by the face of a woman with thin, angular features and her head tilted sideways, staring at her from just a few inches away. She had been at the Patron's ball in Henderson House at the University. And she had been drinking – this must be an alcohol-infused dream.

Joyce gasped and tried to push herself away from the strange woman, her hands clawing through the dirt; she wasn't at the university anymore. And she was not at home in bed, either. This was no dream.

"Wh - where am I?"

The woman extended her hand, the long, bell-like sleeves of her thick robe swinging like a bird's wing as she opened her hand to the forest around them. Joyce turned and gasped, scrambling to her feet.

She was in an almost perfectly round clearing surrounded by tree branches twisted and coiled together. The trees were silhouetted in the moonlight, so bright everything looked silver and cast shadows on the dirt and grass. Shadows of a hundred people or more stood shoulder-to-shoulder between the trees.

"The sacrifice is frightened," a shaky voice whispered behind her and was immediately shushed by others. "What? It is only the truth!"

"Lane, shut your mouth, or we will put you back into the nursery herd, and you will have to wait another year for your coming out," an angry male responded.

Joyce whirled to see where the voice came from, but the trees were thicker behind her, so she found only the silent figures of strangers staring at her.

"What is this? Where am I? How did I get here? What's going on?"

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“Your questions are normal, of course. But quite pointless. The ritual is about to begin. You would do better to make peace with your God if you have one,” the woman in front of her said.

“Tell me where I am and who these people are?” her voice shook, and so did her body.

The woman sighed and fluffed her thick robe.

“If you wish to spend your final moments in the search for truth, very well, but questions will only bring more questions. You are in Wildwood. You were brought here as a sacrifice (one who fights for the king's pleasure). It is a rare honour, though I know you were not raised in our world to appreciate it. You will likely not survive the night, but your death is not in vain. It will assure the survival of Anima. You should take great pride in it.”

Joyce’s mouth dropped open. “A sacrifice? What king? Who the hell are you, people?”

The woman sighed and made a slight clucking noise. “You see, I did tell you questions would only bring more questions. Hear me, then prepare yourself: when the drums begin to beat, the others will enter, and the fighting will begin. Show yourself worthy of the choice. Die with honour.”

“Die?! I’m not fighting anyone.”

“You do not have a choice,” the woman ruffled her robe again. “If you do not fight, you will be slain. It is not an honourable death.”

“Stop talking about me dying! I am not dying. This is a dream, or a hallucination, or something!”

“No,” the woman said firmly and stepped close. So close, Joyce put her hands up to stop her in case this was the beginning of the fighting. Her finger brushed the woman’s robe, which was not fur but feathers. Soft, tiny feathers. But Joyce didn’t have time to consider what that meant before the woman continued, her eyes fixed on Joyce’s with a fierce light. “This is not a dream. You are no longer in your world and your chances of ever returning to it dim with every moment you refuse to fight. You must accept that your life has been altered and meet the challenge before you, or you will die, Joyce.”

“How do you know my name?”

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“You were chosen for this. Selected by –“ A deep, rhythmic boom rang between the trees, and the crowd shifted, whispering. The woman cut off and turned, staring toward the moonlight. “He comes,” she said breathlessly. “And the other sacrifices also. Give your life to please him, and you will be honoured by the tribes.” Then she bowed to Joyce, muttered a few words under her breath, and disappeared to join the circle under the trees with a snap of her robe.

Gaping, Joyce turned in the direction of the drums. Between the two largest trees directly under the full moon, more than a dozen people walked slowly, their steps in time with the drum beat. There didn't seem to be a line or order in how the people were gathered. However, they moved in clusters, all walking before a tall figure deep in the dark under the distant trees. A drummer at his elbow kept the time, and several behind him in a line, their instruments echoing in the chill night air.

Joyce covered her mouth with her hands as the first people at the front emerged from the shadows, and she could finally see them in the silver light.

They were all women.

They were all painted, their bodies dotted and lined in swipes of some paint that glowed white in the moonlight, making patterns on them resembling spots, stripes, feathers, and fur.

But, other than the paint, they were all completely naked.

Joyce looked in every direction, searching wildly for a way out, an escape from this nightmare; who were these people? And what were they going to do? But everywhere she turned, she met eyes fixed on her, sometimes teeth bared, and a wall of bodies that did not move to give her ground.

Then the drums stopped.

Joyce turned on her heel as the man, who was this King the woman had spoken of, finally stepped out of the darkness and into the moonlit clearing.

Head and shoulders taller than anyone near him and with a chest so broad he seemed to threaten the trees, he stepped into the circle, bringing with him an air of violence only barely leashed, a sense of sheer feral power. His hair fell into his eyes, and his vest's thick fur collar that looked like a massive lion's mane framed his angular face and light eyes. Under the high-

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collared vest that fell to sweep around his knees, he wore leather pants and no shirt. His biceps, chest, and abdomen were oiled and shining in the moonlight. He was perhaps the most carnal man Joyce had ever laid her eyes on, and he scanned the clearing as if it and everyone within it belonged to him.

There was a rustle in the trees, and Joyce realised everyone watching had bowed to him, including the naked women who had spaced themselves around the circle, each of them facing him with their heads bowed. Everyone, that is, except Joyce. She swallowed hard as they all straightened, the watchers in the trees leaning in, breathless and waiting for him to speak.

But Joyce froze because as he raised his great head and scanned the clearing, his eyes locked on her, and the light of recognition burned in them for a split second. There was a crystal moment during which their gaze held, and Joyce would have sworn he called her name, yet his lips didn't move.

She blinked and sucked in a breath.

But his face remained a flat mask. Then he dragged his gaze to her left, and as he continued to scan the crowd, he opened his mouth and began to speak.

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SUNG

He hated this.

Every step alongside the drums grated on Sung like a claw drawn down his spine.

He knew his people needed the ancient traditions to feel the instincts of their ancestors speaking in the tribes. But the rite of survival was brutal, uncivilized and deadly. It appeased the flesh but did nothing for the mind. So, he dreaded every step he took towards the circle. He hated that as king; he could not denounce it but the opposite. He had to protect the traditions no matter how terrible they were. This night would end with blood on his hands, with a copper tang of it in his mouth.

Sung let a low growl flicker in his throat. The drummer next to him eyed him warily.

Slowly, slowly, they made their painful way towards the bloodbath. While there was no doubt he had seen that pure humans were often marked by the weakness of both body and mind. It was also true that if he were a human ruler, he would likely never find himself overseeing a fight to the death where females fought to become his mate.

There were some things the purists got right; the drums pounded on until finally, Sung took his first step into the clearing, turning, nodding to show himself to his people. His people murmured and chattered their excitement as they bowed their submission to him. Most of them he knew bowed with gritted teeth and unsheathed claws, but at least for now, they disguised their treason.

Sung scanned the circle slowly, letting his scent call the devotion of the loyal. He reached the northern end of the clearing, and his eyes landed on the pure one that had been chosen. It was like a set of claws on his stomach. Only years of training and discipline stopped Sung's jaw from falling open in shock.

"Joyce?" he breathed to himself; it was not possible, it could not be possible; it also could not be a coincidence. Yet, no one knew, and if she was here, she was destined for death.

The thought turned his stomach cold. She froze in his gaze, not because she recognised him but because some long-buried instinct within her understood the danger he posed. She responded to his presence, not his person. How was it possible that she was here?

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Instinctively, he turned to look at the wolves. He was sure this was their doing, but he could not let himself show her any special attention or let them know they had succeeded in unsettling him. So, after he met eyes with every Alpha in the packs, he moved on to the other tribes. But his mind turned back to her with every passing breath.

“Welcome, Anima!” he called across the night to the answering chorus of barks, coughs, calls, and applause. “You come tonight in memory of your ancestors. The sacrifices you offer will ensure the strongest blood continues to flow in the veins of Anima’s rulers. These offerings will be honoured for generations. The clan leader, his father, and his father’s father, thank you.” He paused for effect and to receive their applause but was forced to suck in a deep breath to brace himself. “Tonight, the future of Anima will step forward. Tonight, the tribes receive their queen!”

The response would have sounded chaotic to human ears, but Sung could pick out the chitter of warning from the birdlike avian lines, the nicker of submission from the horse-blood equines, the snarls of the wolfish lupines, even the toadlike amphibians raised their croaks along with the other tribes. All of Anima was represented tonight, and despite their different hopes for this night, all anticipated the next step.

Even Sung did not know how the wolves had found Joyce, but he knew the lupine battle strategy was second to none. He could not do anything to save her without weakening the position of the entire kingdom. The thought tore a snarl from his throat, echoing across the chatter and silencing the crowd. He let the silence hang in the air to remind the wolves who were in control.

He kept his face blank of emotion, knowing they would be watching him closely.

“Only on this night, once per generation, do we bring the pure to Anima to offer them the chance to prove their blood. And so, I call on the tribes to recognise our human sister, the pure.”

He swept a hand toward Joyce, and the tribes answered with hisses, croaks, barks and bleats, each calling to her ancient human blood in their tongue. It was tradition to give the pure sacrifice a chance to speak words to be remembered. So, as they quieted, Sung held his breath,

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forcing himself to pretend disinterest in what she might say despite his entire body yearning to lean closer.

“I... I don’t even know you, people! Why am I here?”

Murmurs rose in the circle, some with discomfort, others amused. There was a great variety of opinions about continuing the tradition of bringing a pure one into the rite. But no matter how soft-hearted, Anima would never respect a show of fear.

Sung did not miss that as the crowd murmured their thoughts to each other; Lucine, the lupine sacrifice, widened her eyes at Joyce and drew a hooked finger across her throat. To anyone from Anima, she would have clawed her belly to make the threat, but she knew enough of humans to understand that they would miss the reference to the wolves’ practice of disembowelling prey.

“Let us get this shitshow on the road,” he muttered under his breath. He nodded once, and the drummer next to him snapped his stick down on the drum thrice quickly. “Let the rite begin!” Sung roared and was answered by the crowd.

The women within the circle leapt to life or, rather, to death.

Turning to take his place in the circle, he knew he could not allow his face to fall or give away his pity for Joyce. But he felt it to his bones. Sympathy for her and rage for the wolves who had hunted her down, but also for himself. Joyce did not deserve to die because he had been too weak to finish his enemies.

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JOYCE

That terrifying man roared a command to start. All the women in the circle immediately tensed. They moved from their almost prayerful stances to half-crouched on the heels of their feet as the crowd cheered.

Briefly, no one seemed to know what to do. The women all looked at each other, but no one moved; for a single breath, Joyce hoped none of these women would fight. Her hopes were dashed when a feminine snarl erupted from Joyce's right. She turned to watch a woman, though clearly strong and painted entirely in fur, leap on the back of the woman closest to her, who was painted in swirls and spirals. The fur-painted woman took the other's head between both hands and twisted her neck with a mighty jerk that snapped her spine.

The body sagged in her hands, and she let it drop, standing over it as it twitched for a handful of seconds while she scanned the clearing. For a moment, their eyes met, and the fur-painted woman smiled and raised her eyebrows but then darted across the clearing to a spot where another woman was rising. The woman rose from the ground, shaking the dirt from a body in front of her. All breath left Joyce's body; what nightmare was this?

Bile rose in her throat, and Joyce whirled around, painfully aware of the carnage behind her but looking to clear her mind of the gore and death occurring around her. Instead, she found a circle of people cheering, screaming, barking and growling like animals on the hunt. Their eyes passed over her with looks of contempt as she rushed to the tree nearby and leaned on it, throwing up the last of the alcohol and appetisers she'd had at the patron's ball.

As she coughed and spat, her entire body trembling, there was a significant hiss and a shriek nearby. Joyce whipped around to find two women (one painted in feathers and the other one in a strange set of lines and dots) wrestling in the dirt, teeth bared.

It was instinct to get away, to hide, but there were so many people. Without thought, Joyce grasped the tree's lowest branch and pulled herself up, running her feet up the trunk as she had as a child. The ridiculous high heels she still wore slid on the bark, but she clung, and the thick denim of her nicest jeans gave her traction on the branch as she hiked a leg over and pulled herself to sit against the trunk.

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It wasn't a large tree, but there was a strange twisting in the branches with clusters of upward-pointing leaves at the end of every branch. A large branch gave her some cover from the battle below but allowed her to peer through to see much of what was happening below between the gaps.

"Is she allowed to do that?" the young voice she had heard earlier whined.

Joyce froze, but several shushed the young one, and no one came to tug her down, so Joyce braced herself against the tree trunk and tried to catch her breath, but it didn't work. Her entire body trembled, humming with fear. She knew being up here only delayed what had to be an inevitable end. Whomever these people were, they did not hesitate to kill.

She peered between a gap in the leaves to see the fur-painted woman chase another across the circle, snarling, teeth bared and launching on the other woman. They rolled and tumbled through the dirt together, and when the dust settled, the fur-painted woman was the one to rise, her face dark with the other woman's blood. A strange noise erupted from Joyce's throat. Where is she? How the hell had she gotten here? And how long did she have before she died?

The wolf-daughter, Lucine, was ruthless and committed as a machine. She had been the first to take a kill, which had the lupines howling their pleasure and excitement. And she was making her way through the other opponents with efficient, deadly grace. Lucan would be strutting for weeks.

Sung growled in his throat. He was distracted for a moment, watching her tear out the throat of the avalanche sacrifice, an unnecessary reminder of the merciless nature of the wolves. But he turned quickly, unable to stop himself from looking for Joyce and, in the same breath, wishing he never had to see her here.

With profound grief, he realised she was already down, gone for a moment; his memories flickered to a tiny, human girl, so kind and unself-conscious. A little girl who had ignored his strange behaviour and instead simply shared his love for animals had made herself his friend. Defended him to her peers and her parents, who were wisely wary of the neighbour boy who demonstrated such strange behaviour.

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Thank the creator; he had never transformed in front of them. His control had been patchy at best back then. Sadness settled into his bones as he realised that the only bright light in the human world from his childhood had been extinguished. The only light his heart had ever recognised. He allowed himself one moment of mourning, knowing the gathered audience would assume he had grieved all his sacrifices. But he resolved then that he would make sure she had a proper burial. He knew the pure humans generally felt a body must be buried or burned.

With stinging eyes, he inhaled her scent, intending to locate her body in the circle so he could return later to bury her. Instead, his senses tingled with the smell of hot blood, still pumping her unique scent, impossibly alive. Turning his head left and right as if scanning the rite, he continued to breathe in the scents until he had identified her unique scent mixed with the disturbed bark of the tree on the northern end of the circle. But where was she? She had hidden.

Sung blinked; his two natures argued about how he should feel: The Anima within him, the blood of his predator ancestors, growled and shook itself. It had nothing but contempt for the prey's behaviour. But his humanity applauded her resourcefulness that she sought an answer other than bloodlust.

Both perked their ears as his heart beat faster because she was still alive. Then he blinked and turned away from the tree before anyone noticed his attention. The rite was almost finished, the clearing already littered with bodies. Lucine was in the dirt, far to his left, straddling the equine sacrifice, strangling the life out of her. The girl had stopped fighting, only one of her legs still kicking weakly. It would not be long, but he would be forced to watch Lucine slay Joyce with no other battles.

"Fuck," he muttered under his breath. He had always enjoyed the human curses. They were very visceral, and he would undoubtedly utter a few more choice words before this night was over.

The wolves began howling and clapping as Lucine pushed her to her feet. She was exhausted but smiling; that wolf grin she knew made the herds shiver. She turned towards him and bowed, then started forward. Sung realised she and the wolf packs were unaware of Joyce, who was still hidden in the tree. Lucine was so confident that she would use only her eyes, not

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scenting for her enemies. It was a fatal mistake, and once he prayed, she would correct it before she reached him for the offering. He would not be able to accept it, and she would be shamed.

Unfortunately, she was too busy accepting the cheers of her people howling for the moon as she stumbled towards him, her body spent, to realise the error. So, when she reached the dirt just feet before him and swept a bow, he was forced to speak before she made her offerings of devotion.

“There is still one left, Lucine,” he growled. She blinked, but to her credit, she did not argue; she just dropped to a crouch and began scenting the clearing behind her. It took her only a few more seconds than it had already taken Sung himself to locate Joyce. It was such a pity she was a wolf and would be shamed by this moment. She would make a formidable Alpha one day.

With Sung watching, yearning for this to end any way other than what it must do, Lucine tracked the scent straight to the tree. Without hesitating, she leapt and grabbed for Joyce, who shrieked like a wounded rodent in an owl's talons.

Sung was torn between contempt for her weakness and grief for the girl she'd been to him as she was dragged from the heavy branch. He was about to close his eyes, not wishing to see the moment when Lucine tore the life from her, but one of Joyce's feet kicked out as she attempted to stop herself from being pulled from the tree, and the wicked heel on it caught an overly confident Lucine right in the face.

The wolf-woman yowled like a cat, flinching and letting go with one hand. Sung's heart rose for a moment, but only for a moment, because a second later, even as Lucine held her eye with one hand, Joyce lost her grip on the tree and tumbled awkwardly to the ground on top of the wolf.

Sung braced himself for the bloodbath and forced his expression to an unfeeling mask, knowing even a tired Lucine would enjoy ending the pure one. But a murmur rose from the crowd in the clearing, many of the Anima shifting uneasily. Sung's heart raced, but he forced himself to stillness as Joyce stumbled to her feet, staring open-mouthed at Lucine on the ground, who was not moving.

Joyce stepped back, then jerked to look left and right at the people surrounding the clearing as if someone else might attack her. Sung scented Lucine, but her scent did not have the

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pale chill of death. She was still alive but unconscious. Yet, Joyce continued to back away, and then she looked at him, her eyes and mouth wide.

“She is not yet dead,” Sung growled. “Finish her.”

Joyce’s entire body pulled away from him.

“I’m not killing her.”

The clearing shook with the fierce reaction of the crowd; all of the tribes agreed the rite must be fulfilled. Sung snarled, and they quieted, but the wolves were pacing, all the herds stamped their feet, and the avalines kept ruffling their cloaks. Sung snorted her scent from his nose in disgust; the only counter to his rage was the awareness that Lucine’s father, Lucan, must be quivering with shame. His daughter was already humiliated by this loss. But to be declared too weak to be killed in good conscience and by an untried human! Sung would have given his left testicle to hear Lucan’s thoughts.

His enemy’s discomfort aside, Sung growled his anger. She would not force him to be the one to end this! He started toward her, the tribes chattering in response to the tension in him, their king lion on the prowl.

“She is a sacrifice,” he snarled. “Just like you. Kill her.”

But for the first time on this horrific night, Joyce showed a spark of the firm and vibrant child she had been. She straightened and turned to face him fully, locked eyes with him, clenching her hands into fists.

“No!” she yelled.

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JOYCE

The rage in his eyes was terrifying, but if she was going to die tonight, it would not be with blood on her hands. So, with trembling knees, she stared him down, gulping when his eyes flashed, and for a moment, she thought she was staring into the eyes of a lion,

Unable to hold the penetrating gaze, she looked at the fur-woman, crumpled at her feet. Joyce knew she would be sore the next day; that fall had been awkward, and the ground was hard. But she had felt her elbow come down as she reached out to catch herself. She had taken the women in the temple. It was an accident, but it felled her like a tree.

“Kill her!” the king snarled, the last word guttering in his throat like the big cat he reminded her of. Joyce looked down at the woman again; no doubt she deserved to die. Joyce had just watched her kill several other women.

She could feel the eyes of the spectators on the back of her neck. But she took another step away from the woman and shook her head.

“I am not going to kill her.”

The crowd gasped, but no one said a word, and Joyce felt their attention shift to their leader. As did he; she seemed to swell under the scrutiny; he pulled his shoulders and head back, though his chin stayed low.

“You would exchange your life for the life of a proud woman who would have torn out your throat without a second thought? You do not know what you do,” he barked through his teeth.

Joyce shivered but forced herself to hold his gaze. “I do not even know where I am! But I know life and murder,” she pointed at the fur-painted woman. “If I have to die tonight, I’ll do it with a clear conscience, unlike her.”

The words were barely out of her mouth when the gathered people poured their disgust in an overwhelming roar of shrieks, howls, bleats and hisses. If the man in front of her were less compelling or in charge, Joyce would have whirled to ensure they did not come back at her. But the man did not even look at them. Although his massive shoulders heaved with his breath and his hands clenched to fists at his side.

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He lifted one hand, barely inches, and the noise stopped. Joyce could hear the people moving now, hissing their dissatisfaction to each other now that he had commanded them to stop yelling at her.

She swallowed hard, and the king's eyes narrowed. She would have sworn that look of recognition passed behind his eyes again, but his expression did not change; he huffed a breath and thought he would speak, but suddenly there was noise to her left. She turned to find a man running hunched over, teeth bared, snarling.

"You will not shame my sister!" he roared.

Still twenty feet from her, the man leapt, and in the dark, he looked for a moment as if his limbs had become legs, his hands were paws, and his open mouth grew fangs that flashed in the moonlight as they came for her throat.

Chapter Two

Not Strong Enough, An Unquestionable king, Scent recognition

JOYCE

A vast shadow rose directly before her, then leapt forward to meet the attacker. Joyce realised the king had jumped between her and the man. The two now looked into each other's eyes. They rolled in combat, snarling, snapping and moving so quickly. Joyce was sure her eyes played tricks on her, making her see silver fur and a black jaw tumbling in the dirt with a massive tawny hide and a golden mane.

The sound was horrific, with growls that rattled her ribs and snarls of bloodthirst. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped. The man who had tried to attack her lay on his back with his hands clutching the king's wrist while the king had his hands wrapped around his neck. He roared his words, and Joyce heard the animal in him.

"You will NOT break the rite! You will not shame our people!"

There was a moment where the man twisted under the king's hand, then made a slight sound, and his body slumped. It reminded her so much of the sag of the dead body earlier that Joyce wondered if he had died. But no, as soon as he slacked, the king let go of his neck and straightened it but remained standing over him.

The man slowly got to his feet, his eyes alight with rage, but did not meet the king's eyes or move towards her. He stood, head bowed, shoulders hunched on his heel and ran back to his place in the circle. The audience was utterly silent.

Then the king turned and stared at her, his chest shifting up and down with his breath. She waited, but he did not speak; instead, he walked towards her, chin low so the shadow cast by his stiff jaw cut across the thick fur collar of his vest. His hair had fallen over his eyes in the scuffle, and he peered at her like a lion stalking his prey. With each step, his graceful, rolling gait reminded her of a predator stalking its prey. He did not make a sound despite the forest floor littered with twigs and leaves.

"Wh-who are you?" Joyce stammered, backing away her hands up. He met her step for step until she came up hard against the tree behind her and did not stop until they stood toe to

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toe, and he loomed over her, so broad his shoulders and chest made a wall in front of her. She could feel the heat rising off his skin in the cool night air.

“I am the king,” his voice was dark and husky gravel. Behind him, a chorus of coughing cheers, howls and chirps of agreement rose from the people watching. “And you are?”

“Joyce,” she breathed.

“Joyce,” he growled, leaning in closer, bringing the scent of pine and rain and the musk of something distinctly male. His eyes dropped to her throat. He leaned in suddenly, inhaling deeply and gently dragged his nose along her collarbone.

Her skin prickled wherever he touched her. Her reflex was to put her hands on his chest to stop him from pressing any closer. When she touched him, he went still as a hunted animal. Then, he straightened, meeting her eyes warily. His face remained in that flat, expressionless mask. But his eyes glowed with a feral light that delivered a shot of adrenalin to her gut and a tingling thrill to areas she did not usually think about.

“Joyce,” he rasped again.

“Yes?”

“I am Sung,” he said the name with a strange, guttural roll that reminded her of a growl. “I am the ruler of all beasts, I am the clan leader of the Anima, and I am alpha of all,” several snarls rose behind him at the last statement, but he leaned in until the scruff on his jaw rasped her cheek and said, “and you will be my mate.”

The forest behind him erupted.

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JOYCE

“She is no queen.”

“This is not the intention of the rite!”

“A human? Did he just say he is mating a human?”

The chaos was shifting and noisy, punctuated by howls and other noises that startled Joyce. But Sung did not even break eye contact. When the protests did not die, he shouted for silence, and the crowd cut off immediately, shifting on their feet and murmuring, but no one raised their voices again. Only after they had settled did Sung turn to look at them.

“If you would speak to me, speak plainly and show yourself. I will not give an audience to cowards hanging behind a crowd.”

“She won through a deception,” a deep voice barked from Joyce’s right. She whirled as Sung chuckled and swung his massive body around to face the man as if he was not afraid to have a menacing voice at his back.

“You, of all people, condemn the use of deceit and strategy in battle, Lucan?” Sung said, his voice strong and good-natured, though she could see the gleam in his eye. Some in the crowd laughed, too, but it died quickly. He did not trust this man.

“I condemn using deceit because you are a coward and hide behind your weakness,” the man growled.

“An interesting statement,” Sung said through gritted teeth; every inch of his body appeared at ease, his weight back on one leg, his hands relaxed at his sides. But Joyce could feel the coiled tension in him. “Whose tribe selected the pure one?”

“Mine,” the man replied.

“The call to find the pure one is clear: identify the best bloodline. She was the best and most challenging opponent to bring to the rite, so if she were to win, her blood would run in the veins of our kin. And so, she was measured by your people to be the strongest of those you could find in the human world, yes? Unless there was some other plan afoot that did not fulfil the terms of the rite?”

The crowd murmured. Lucan did not move or reply immediately, and to Joyce, it seemed the entire circle leaned in, waiting for his answer.

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“We did our best choosing a candidate,” he said finally. “But she was untested. Her response here has proven she is not the queen we need.”

Everyone turned to Sung.

“How convenient,” he muttered, so quietly Joyce wondered if anyone, but she could hear him. “The rite is in the hands of the creator,” he said, his voice low but carrying through the chill night air. “The wolf-father should be grateful for the mercy of her queen; that means his daughter remains alive at this moment.”

Lucan looked at the woman on the ground, curling his upper lip.

“She is shamed by the woman. She fought like a true wolf, and her efforts were not recognised; her opponent deemed her... incapable?” he said.

Joyce blinked. “What?”

Sung snapped his head to glare at her with such a dark warning; her mouth closed instantly. After an uncomfortable moment, he turned back to Lucan.

“The pure one does not know our customs or the rites. In her words, mercy is a measure of value. She measured Lucine’s life as more valuable than taking the win for herself. Motives matter, Lucan.”

That last statement dripped with such weight and venom that Joyce wondered what stood between the two men. What previous conversation did Sung refer to that made Lucan go still again?

“The future of the tribes matters more,” he growled, stepping toward Sung and standing so obviously ready for the violence that the crowd began to whisper as the two men stared each other down.

Joyce held her breath as Sung took one step, then another, then another, stalking towards the man who stood, chin low but body braced for impact.

When they were mere inches apart, Sung stopped.

“Did you just make a challenge for the throne, Lucan?” he said in a low voice, inviting the man to speak yes so he would have the opportunity to slaughter him.

Lucan, only an inch shorter than Sung, though not as broad, stared back, his face expressionless. The tension in the air pulled tighter, and Joyce wondered if she had, without

Anima

meaning to, sparked a revolution in these strange people. And what would happen to her if Sung was killed?

But with the tiniest shift of his body, Sung suddenly seemed to loom over Lucan. "Make your choice, wolf," he growled through his teeth. "Submission or death?" The shift was so subtle that Joyce almost missed it. But something in Lucan changed. Though he did not break eye contact, his chin lowered slightly, and the tension left his body. Sung stepped in closer until they were almost chest to chest, and he stared down at Lucan, who seemed to shrink reluctantly. But Joyce knew she had understood this correctly when the crowd began to murmur again, whispering their thoughts about the exchange. And Sung turned away from Lucan to address them. "I still do not hear a valid counter to my claim of a mate. Are there more?" he turned the circle, his hands open to invite comment.

The people shifted, looking at each other, whispering. But then, one man stepped forward. He was long, lean, naked above his leather pants, and whip-strong. He moved with an odd grace that reminded Joyce of a snake or a fish in the water.

"Majesty," he said loudly enough for the entire hearing to clear. "Regardless of her selection, the goal of the rite is to identify the strongest queen, the best to mother the royal line. She did not even fight. She does not possess the battle spirit needed of a leader.

"Severus?" Sung gave a cold smile, and Joyce's skin crawled. "She faced me down and refused my direct order to kill Lucine. Unless you see me as an easily dominated opponent?" there was a collective gasp at that. Sung's smile got even colder as he stared down at this man, Seerus. Sung sauntered up to him, and his body moved with a lethal grace. "Does your king lack knowledge of the battle or the courage in it that a battle queen is needed to pick up the slack?" he asked menacingly.

A sense of barely contained power suddenly rolled off Sung in waves.

Seerus' throat bobbed.

Laurie Bowler

SUNG

When the serpent did not respond to his challenge, Sung let himself feel his kingship, strength, power, and authority. He let it all roll around in his head and felt his blood pulse. Then he let the male serpent and anyone who cared to pay attention scent him. He was the ruler of beasts! His dominance and his sheer masculinity.

This sense of himself had made him dominant, to begin with. Even as heir, his kingship could be challenged. He would have to earn it. He remembered how he had grown and strengthened as a young man-cub, let himself be filled with the pride of this position he owned. All the males would then scent him and decide if they wanted to accept his offer.

They did not, of course; that is why he was king.

But just for a moment, inside, he begged one of them to snap and come at him and give him a chance to unleash some of this tension and aggression he was building. He was tempted to taunt Lucan. But that was a difference between a wolf and a lion. Lions made the decisions that were best for the pride as a whole. While pack animals, wolves are still centred on themselves or their family groups. Let Lucan come at me, and he would tear the man's head off. But Sung refused to be the one to lose control or push someone else to it. He would lead by example.

Then he spoke to Severus again.

"Speak up, man. Do you feel a queen is needed to make up for some lack in your king?" he growled.

"No, Sire. But if something were to happen to you."

"Did my mother lead in battle, Severus?"

"No, majesty."

"Did my grandmother?"

"No."

The king stared down at the man, who broke eye contact and dropped his head, stepping back in the circle of watchers as Sung snarled at the rest of them.

"You demanded the ancient rite as was your due, and I fulfilled it as your king," he turned to stare at Lucan and the wolves. "You chose the contenders for my pleasure and trained your

Anima

sacrifices. The result stands before you: a clan that will not need to grieve their daughter's death and a pure one as queen for the first time in twenty generations. You asked for the right to show you the clan's future, and so it has. That future is now. Anima, meet your chosen queen!"

The tribes all responded as they should, raising their voices in their battle cries to celebrate her victory. But he sensed the tension in them. The forced feeling of the cheers. The question remained in their minds. Well, let them question the commands. They were the ones who had brought this about.

Then he turned to face Joyce. She stood there, hands at her sides clenched into tiny fists, dressed like the human world, her eyes wide and her hair falling from its twists.

"Joyce, I am sorry that you were pulled into our world without choice, but you have earned the greatest honour Anima can bestow upon us," it was unfortunate that he had to have this conversation with her publicly, but it was perhaps even more critical for the tribes to hear it more than Joyce herself. "You are now one of us, and I will not leave you unprotected. All that is mine is yours, my wealth, strength, body, everything my position as king offers. But you need not fear me. The Anima may have animal blood in our veins, but we are first thinkers, people of heart. You need never fear that I would force myself upon you. You will rule with me, but you will do so untouched until you would choose differently."

Everyone gasped, and Sung had to bite back his smile. Let them chew on that.

"But Sire," one of the lionesses spluttered. Sung had to swallow his snarl; his tribe would question him on this.

He turned to face Khloe, who was a Leonise wise woman. As such, she carried her dignity and authority. He would do well to take care of her.

"Yes, mother," he said gently, using the title she had earned before he went to the human world.

"The Royal Line, you must have an heir!"

He nodded. "And there is a great deal of time until I shake the tundra in the sky, mother," he replied.

"But if she is not mated."

"You doubt my ability to tempt a female in heat?" he said with a smile.

Laurie Bowler

The tribes laughed, and a couple of the women shrieked their giggles. But Khloe gave him the tight-lipped stare of an unimpressed parent.

“Do not be childish; the whole point of taking a mate is to enjoy both the union and the fruits of the mating, Sung. I know your mother raised you to understand this,” she said.

“And should my mate choose to take me, I will enjoy the union greatly, mother, I assure you,” he said dryly. Many of the men laughed, but his attention was caught elsewhere. He could smell Joyce’s embarrassment as blood rushed to her cheeks. Ah, that was right; he had forgotten how much more careful the humans were speaking about the acts of love. Their customs were different. Speaking of mating, it was generally done in private, between couples. Ah, well, she would need to get used to this. She was Anima now. “None of us knows the future,” he called to the gathering. “We know only what the creator has chosen to reveal today, and this is my queen. So let us return to the caves and the ceremony and celebrate!”

As his people cheered, even if it was half-hearted, he turned back to Joyce, approaching slowly, then offered his arm for her to take. She looked at him and hesitated. Everyone was too busy talking or gathering their things to have noticed, but it would not take long.

“I understand that this has been a difficult night for you,” he said under the guise of pulling a piece of her hair back behind her ear. She flinched when he touched her, which made him feel sick. “But you must understand that unless you are known to be under my protection, you will not be accepted here in our world,” he stared at her then, willing her to remember him, to sense his truth, to trust him. To at least feel the sense of safety that rested in him. “I spoke true, Joyce. I will never force you to do anything. Please come with me back to the caves.”

He offered his arm again, and she looked at it like she was unsure what it was. But her throat jumped, and then she wiped her hands on her jeans and took his arm in both hands.

He tucked her arm under his and started back toward home. He could feel her trembling under his touch and huffed his displeasure, though she did not catch it.

He just prayed he could drag her through the rest of the night, which would seem even more foreign to her than the rite had. Because some of his people stared at her with looks that he did not like.

If she did not stay close to him, she would not live until dawn.

Anima

JOYCE

Joyce stared at the broad arm he offered and swallowed. There was a set of white, jagged lines across his forearm as if some beast had swiped him with claws. His shoulder topped her head, and his chest was so broad, not to mention bare under the open vest, that she could not see past him when he stood before her.

He was huge and scarred and feral.

If he was indeed a protector, she would be safe from anything. But his words could not be trusted. They stared at each other and shifted once, a breath of wind bringing her the scent of pine and rain and something uniquely him and yet somehow familiar, though that was impossible.

He looked over her shoulder, then nudged his offered arm closer with a pointed look. Others must be noticing. Joyce took a deep breath and reminded herself that if she died tonight anyway, it would be better to die touching him than a fur-painted woman.

She put her hands on that arm; it felt like warm steel. Though his skin was surprisingly soft, they started walking. As they disappeared into the shadows under the trees, they were surrounded suddenly by many people from the circle. Primarily big, tall men with straight shoulders and loping strides. At first, Joyce flinched whenever a new body popped up out of nowhere. But as the men circled them and intently watched for anyone else nearby, Joyce relaxed.

It was hard to relax walking through a dark forest in high heels on the arm of a man who looked like he could snap your spine if he hugged you too tight. She caught a tree root at one point, and her heel slid off, turning her ankle. She gasped and almost went down, but he just stiffened his arm and put his hands over hers to keep her grip secure, using himself as a counterweight to swing her back into step and onto her feet.

“Stupid, human shoes,” he muttered under his breath so only she could hear. “You would be better off barefoot, of course. But if you can’t stomach that, I will have some boots found for you back at the caves.”

Laurie Bowler

Caves? Were they going to caves? Of course, they were going to caves. If it were not for the bruises and smells, Joyce would still have told herself this was a dream. But she did not ever remember a dream that smelled quite so uniquely.

They had been walking silently for several minutes when another large man appeared from ahead of them on the path they were following. Joyce gripped Sung's arm and shrank back; the man was a foot taller than Sung; he had to be well over seven feet! Yet his limbs seemed long and thin compared to his barrel of a chest and strong back.

He approached quickly, almost silently, and swept a bow before falling into step with Sung, who had not even slowed his pace. Joyce took nearly two steps to his one.

"Interesting night," the man said in a low, deep voice.

Sung nodded without taking his eyes off the path ahead. "Very, what do the winds say?" he asked casually.

"The winds," the man said through tight lips as if the word was sarcastic. "Would suggest a full fist to watch your majesty's back and another to patrol the caves after the ceremony because tensions are high?"

Sung grunted, and his hand tightened over hers on his arm.

"My people are not so angry yet. I will allow watchmen at the mouth and clearing but no patrols. Besides, things may die down after the ceremony," he replied.

The tall man turned his head to give Sung a sceptical look but only nodded and kept walking. A moment later, Sung's fingers tightened on hers again.

"I am very sorry, Joyce, it was rude of me. I had forgotten you have not met anyone; this is Erwin, Captain of the guard and my defender."

Without thinking, Joyce pulled one hand from under Sung's and extended it past his chest towards the man on his other side. Both men just stared at her hand, then at her face. She flushed and pulled her hand back quickly.

"I am sorry, do you not shake hands?"

Sung growled something under his breath. "My apologies again. I had forgotten the human tradition of shaking hands. Our customs are different. Here, we simply allow ourselves to be scented."

Anima

“Scented?”

The men both nodded.

“Everyone’s smell is unique,” Erwin explained. “Once we are familiar with yours, we will never miss it. And since it seems we will be spending a lot of time together in the future, it would be useful if I could become familiar with yours.”

Joyce frowned, and they both stared at her. “Well, of course, but how exactly would I stop someone from scenting me?” she asked faintly.

Erwin blinked, then brayed a laugh so loud. Joyce was startled, but the man clutched his stomach and almost doubled over. “She has a p-point, Sung,” he brayed. “I can’t believe I never, we never.” He was off in wheezing laughter again. They continued walking until Erwin was under control again; then, as the people outside their circle of guards spread out, the tall man’s face became deadly serious. “Are you certain, Sung?” he asked quietly, his deep voice barely a rustle in the forest leaves.

“Utterly,” Sung said without hesitation.

The tall man sighed. “Then I will circle the warriors while you prepare for the ceremony. We will have a fist prepared to stay clear-headed, just in case. But they will have to remain out of the smoke.”

“I doubt we will have anything to worry about during the flames,” Sung growled. “As long as they keep their wits for after, we will be fine.”

“They will keep their wits. She can dance naked through the village if she wishes. We will see her home safely.”

Sung grunted again, then looked at his man. “Are you sure?”

“Utterly,” Erwin said straight-faced, then he grinned wickedly. “It is safer for us under the foot of the lion than in front of his jaws.”

They both laughed so loudly that it echoed in the trees.

Laurie Bowler

SUNG

Erwin disappeared into the trees, and Sung turned his nose to the wind. Tensions were high indeed. He could smell it on every Anima in the breeze.

Even on Joyce, though her scent was so sweet to him. It was near intoxicating. He had never forgotten her smell. But now that she was no longer a child, the scent of her that he had enjoyed as a cub, the smell that made him feel safe and accepted, had bloomed from a single, frail flower to an entire bouquet.

“What were you two talking about, flames and smoke?” she said cautiously.

The fear in her voice broke through his thoughts and grated on him like fur rubbed the wrong way. No woman should be afraid to walk among the Anima, especially when she was on his arm. But not only was it completely understandable that she was terrified, but it would also have been a lie for him to tell her the risk had passed. His people were not yet satisfied. He ground his teeth but relaxed his face so she would not pick up on his tension.

“The mating ceremony, we call it the flames and the smoke. Well, you will see. It is quite enjoyable, don’t worry. No more killing tonight,” he prayed that was the truth. The wolves had run off far too quickly for his taste.

“M-mating ceremony?” she looked up at him, her mouth open like a fish.

Sung nodded. “Whenever our people declare their intention to mate as bonded pairs, not just for fun, we hold the ceremony. Tonight’s will be special. A king only takes the mating ceremony once,” unless his wife died, but that did not seem a wise point to make when she was already shaking at the knees.

“Is it like, are we getting married?” her voice went up too high at the end, and again, he cursed the plots that had brought her here.

“I know this is a lot, Joyce,” he said quietly. “I know it’s a shock. But I have to ask you to walk through this with me. For your safety and the peace of my people. Anima is your home now, for better or worse.” She turned her head away but did not let go of his arm. He could see the tears in her eyes. “I was honest with you back at the rite. I will never force myself upon you nor create pressure to make you feel you must enter my bed. Your life will be peaceful as long as I

Anima

am the king. We will share a name, a tribe, and a purpose. But your heart and body will remain yours unless you offer them willingly," he sighed.

She chewed on her lip and stared into the forest, where the trees began to spread, and the night air lightened as more moonlight filtered through.

"I believe you," she whispered finally. "I don't know why, but God help me; I believe you."

"The creator will bless you for it," he replied honestly. "Truth is always useful, and it is the one thing I guarantee you will always receive from me: I will not pretend to be what I am not, and I will not ask you to, either."

"Yes, but...."

"Please, Joyce, we are almost to the caves. When there is more time tomorrow, perhaps we will sit down together, and I will answer your questions. I know you have many. Unfortunately, your first night here must be so eventful. But life is life, and the world turns. Tonight, Anima will make you one of us. Tomorrow, we can worry about the rest."

He had hoped she would be distracted by his promise of their arrival, but Joyce glared at him and did not relax.

"How would you feel, I wonder, if you were suddenly ripped out of your entire life here, taken to my world, thrown into a fight for your life, and then forced to marry someone you did not even know? Would you be willing to hear? Tomorrow, we can worry about the rest?"

She had a point, but it was not convenient for her to make it. Sung had already shortened his strides for her as they walked through the trees. But they could not afford to delay. The women of his tribe would already have the flames prepared, and she needed to change into appropriate clothing for the ceremony.

"I understand, Joyce. I do. Perhaps more than you realise. But if I have learned anything as a king, it is that sometimes life forces your hand. The creator knows what is needed to bring us to the right moments and decisions. Perhaps this was just what was required to bring you to the life you were supposed to have?"

"You don't know anything about my life," she spat.

"I know you are an orphan and have not taken a man to bed."

Laurie Bowler

She stopped mid-step, turning to stare at him, open-mouthed. The guards all crouched, looking for the intruder that made them stop, but Sung shook his head at the first leader and then turned back to Joyce.

“How could you possibly know that?” she whispered, looking around to make sure no one else had heard.

“I know because those are the terms for the rite. We are not without hearts, Joyce. The pure one from the human world must be pure, unmarried, unmated and unattached. We would not tear a woman from her family to bring her here to die.”

Anima

Welcome home. Different world; I choose you

“But a woman with no family is just a lamb to the slaughter, to you?”

He blinked. Actually, no, but he could not afford to tell her that. Not until she better understood the forces at work in the Anima kingdom. Glancing at the guards, who were all becoming restless, he patted her hand on his arm and began walking again, urging her to follow. When everyone’s attention was elsewhere, he muttered under his breath so only she could hear.

“I do not expect you to understand. I will try to explain it when there is time and privacy. But be certain of this, Joyce: you were chosen because you were seen to be better, not worse, than others of your kind.”

“Better at what? Dying?”

He had to swallow a laugh because he suspected she was closer to the truth than she was supposed to be. The wolves, he sighed. “Better for Anima, better for me, better for yourself, better to be in this world. A great deal of work strategy goes into selecting the pure one for the rite. You were not chosen at random, I assure you.” She opened her mouth to protest again, but he squeezed her hand and nodded ahead. She had been so busy looking at him that she had not noticed the trees opening or approaching the caves. “Joyce, this is your home. For better or for worse, this is where the creator has brought you. I know you do not know me yet and cannot trust me, but I speak the truth. You will not be harmed here at my hand or by any other if I can prevent it. So come, see your new home, see your new world. You will find it quite enjoyable once you get past the shock.”

Then they broke through the trees into the clearing, and Joyce’s mouth dropped open.

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

When he had said they were going to the caves, Joyce had envisioned cold, hard rock and a yawning, black mouth with cobwebs and crawling things.

Instead, she walked into a city that looked like it had grown there naturally.

Her mouth dropped open as they emerged from the trees, directly into a large clearing, surrounded on one half by an almost sheer, rocky mountainside, peppered with brightly lit cavemouths and pathways, and on the other by trees so tall, they had to be hundreds of years old. They were widely spaced, but their branches twisted long and low, thicker than a man's waist, and only curled up to the sky after running alongside the ground for over a hundred feet.

If Joyce had been bought to this place as a child, she would have thought she was in heaven.

People were everywhere, yet somehow, they blended into the environment, their movements blending into the nighttime shadows. Despite the late hour, people walked through the forest and mountain face. Even children crawled in the trees, running along the lowest branches and swinging from vines that twisted between them.

And as Sung appeared in the clearing, everyone turned and began to call to him. Some in greeting, some clapping or cheering, others howling or making noises that sounded like nothing more than animals to Joyce.

Though he kept his face calm, she felt his pride and tension swell. Because even as his people celebrated him, they also saw her. It was impossible to miss the shock on their faces and how the applause had died quickly. The people from the circle began to circulate among others, leaning into their ears, whispering, and turning to look at her.

Sung's eyes narrowed, but he led her through the clearing, raising his hand or nodding to many who still called his name or blessings to him. He then directed her to a path that wound past the central clearing and into the trees but followed the face of the mountain.

They continued to walk as the noise and bustle of the cave city were swallowed up behind them by the forest. Joyce noticed that the guards had not left them, even though they were now apparently in his city. She looked up at him. His eyes were flat, piercing and fixed on the path ahead, his jaw twitching with tension.

Anima

Joyce was torn. She did not want to marry or mate a stranger, let alone this man, king or not, in this foreign place. She wanted to point out that the people clearly did not want her, and perhaps he should just let her go. But she was desperately aware that without him, she was surrounded by brutal people who would kill her without thought.

“Ignore them,” Sung said quietly as they turned in the path, and the moonlight began to trickle through the trees ahead, painting the ground in silver and white. “They are surprised they thought the outcome was decided before we even entered the rite. It will take very little time for them to adjust.”

“Is there any chance they would hurt you because of me?” she asked.

He cut her a dark look that spoke volumes about his opinions of anyone who might try.

They continued walking and soon broke through the trees again into another, much smaller clearing, but this one was breathtaking.

While the central clearing had been vast and functional, beaten smooth by all the feet of the city’s people. This one was a small meadow of thick grass and flowers peppered with small bushes that became trees at its edge.

Lanterns shone in the tree branches where the path met the open space around it, casting the whole area in a warm glow.

She turned her head to look in every direction as they walked through it. It was beautiful. Breathtaking, if Joyce was honest. The whole place made her want to lay in the grass and stare at the sky. But the fear and disbelief in her would not allow her to enjoy it.

“It is beautiful,” she breathed.

Sung grunted. “It is my home,” he said, but she could tell he was pleased that she liked it.

The clearing was a wide bowl hugged by one side of the forest but tapered at the other end to a V-shaped crevice in the rocky mountainside. At its peak, there was an open cave mouth, but rather than a black hole, it glowed with a warm light that turned the dark rock walls into smooth, warm stone.

As they moved through the clearing towards the cave, the guards spread themselves around and behind them, taking positions around the clearing and facing the trees.

Laurie Bowler

Joyce looked over her shoulder as they walked inside, and from this angle, with the moonlight overhead and the lanterns under the trees, the place looked magical.

How could a massive and ruthless man live in such a beautiful place?

“This is my sanctuary,” Sung said quietly as they took the first steps into the cave. “On a normal day, no one would interrupt us here unless we asked them to.”

“But today is not normal,” Joyce said, her voice shaking. As the rock closed in around her, she became aware of the scars on his skin, his massive size, and how he would have beaten that other man in a heartbeat. The cave mouth led to a corridor to the right, so the opening could not be seen inside.

“I will never harm you, Joyce. Do not fear me,” he said softly, almost tenderly.

They reached a door at the end of the corridor made from raw wood that seemed to have grown into a shape to fit the rock walls and ceiling arch perfectly. Sung dropped his arm to reach for a massive iron ring on the door, and even though the lanterns here were bright, the cave seemed to darken as Joyce found herself suddenly cold without his steel arm to steady her.

He pulled the door open quickly, then stepped back, swinging it wide and smiling at her as he bowed his head slightly.

“Welcome home, Queen Joyce.”

Anima

JOYCE

The cave itself was warm and inviting, a warm and tall space that should have echoed, but there were rugs on the stone floor, curtains and tapestries hanging over the wall to give the big room a comfortable feel. Joyce swallowed. If she had been able to me here by choice, to explore and then go home, she would have wanted to stay a very long time.

Although the furnishings were simple, they were also thick, warm, and of excellent quality. If a little too masculine for her taste. At the narrow end of the room, in the direction of the clearing, a fireplace had been carved into the rock at the front. A couch and several chairs were scattered around a large, dark wood coffee table in front of it. The rest of the room was made of different ideas, with rock platforms for seating, benches, wooden cupboards, and drawer sets where needed. He had a full kitchen with a wood stove, though it looked like it had never been used.

The cave had no natural light, but a string of lanterns circled the space and bowed across the ceiling, bringing a bright, warm glow to every corner. And at the back, the room seemed to curve to another area. This was the direction Sung led her, his steps faster than they had been outside.

“We do not have a lot of time,” he said as they rounded the corner through a narrow, natural arch in the rock that opened into a much smaller room which was dominated by a vast stone platform at its centre covered in furs and pillows.

Joyce blinked. This was the king’s bedroom.

He walked past the bed platform, which was three platforms on different levels; she noticed a set of wooden doors to the right, pulling something out of the space and walking it over to the bed where he placed the pieces.

Because they were fur, she had trouble telling what part of the bed was and what he had taken out of the closet. But then he lifted one piece, clearly a single-shouldered top in soft, gold fur that would cover the chest modestly but leave the stomach bare. He extended it towards her, frowning. “It might be tight, but I think they judged it well.”

She blinked at the tiny top. “You mean too small for you, right?” she snapped.

Sung’s face stayed expressionless.

Laurie Bowler

“I won’t be wearing a top,” he said dryly, then raised an eyebrow at her. “It will be warm at the flames; you will be grateful for the lighter clothing,” he said, nodding at her suit jacket and jeans. “And while I appreciate that the shoes were effective in the rite, there will be no need for them tonight. The ground at the square is smooth.”

Joyce looked down at herself, realising how out of place she must look to these people. Everyone she had seen so far wore natural fibres, fur, leather and linen clothing if they wore it. And she did not think she had seen a pair of shoes among them.

Then she looked up at Sung, this huge man, this king and the impossibility of her situation hit her all over. She dropped her face in her hands. It had to be a dream.

“Joyce,” he said softly, gently. She could hear him moving toward her but did not look up. She could not believe she had somehow ended up here, wherever he was, and with this man, and now she had to marry him. “Joyce, you are safe; you did it; you survived. And now you are here. I know it is a shock, and I do not expect you to smile about it yet. But this is the life you have been given by the creator. Tonight’s ceremony is a celebration. It will bind us before the people of Anima so that you are known and understood to be my mate and the queen.”

“What does that even mean?” she replied. “How can I be the queen of a people of people I have never met? How can you expect me to just be here? Send me back! I won’t try to make trouble for you. I just –”

“That is not possible,” he said firmly but with compassion. “The barrier between our worlds is complicated, designed only for the Anima. As a pure one, you gained entry safely. But if I was to send you back, the likelihood is that you would end up either dead or insane.”

“What? Why?”

“Because the human mind was never intended to see the world,” he said frankly.

“You were only ever granted access one way across the barrier. Only Anima may go back and forth. If I sent you back, the barrier would fight you; I do not know why; it is the creator’s way.”

Joyce waited, but there was nothing more. He said that as if it were an explanation. “So, that is it? My life is gone?”

“Yes,” his stark tone, his unbending expression. Joyce wanted to scream.

Anima

“You can’t just say yes!” she shrieked. “You can’t just tell a person that their life is over like that as if that is just a plain fact!”

His brows pinched in. “But it is?”

“But you can’t if your life...” she sputtered.

Sung stepped across the final inches between them, his eyes burning with intensity as his presence suddenly filled the room. Joyce was left shaking, forcing herself to hold his gaze and not back down.

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

"You say your life is over," Sung began.

Joyce coughed. "I don't just say it. Whoever stole me from my world had killed me and ended my life just as surely as if they had murdered me on the spot. It is over to everyone who knew me for everything I have ever done or been involved in. They will never know where I went or what happened to me. I will never finish anything I started. My life, in my world, is over."

"And you grieve it?" he asked.

"Of course, I grieve it!"

He frowned. "But was it such a life worth holding so tightly? The sacrifices from the humans are selected, it is true, but only in certain situations. You are an orphan with no family.

You had no lover. Can life be whole without family or a mate?"

Her mouth dropped open, and she gaped like a fish on a hook.

"I would have; there was a man I thought those things would have come. I only needed time."

A strange expression crossed his features that she could not read. He looked down momentarily in the most uncertain way she had seen him since he appeared in the clearing. Then he looked up again, his eyes locked on hers.

"What happened to your parents?" he asked softly, gently. If he had asked in any other tone, she would have told him to mind his own business. But it was as if he cared.

She swallowed.

"When I was in my last year of high school, they were in a car accident. My mother died at the scene. My father held on for a few days, but it was better that he did not wake up," she cursed, the tears threatening again. She was so sick of crying! Of feeling weak! But this night, it had all been too much.

As she cursed and tried to wipe the tears from her face, his face dropped, and she saw lines next to his mouth for the first time.

"I don't know if it is a comfort, but that is one manner of death you do not need to fear in the wildwood," he said carefully. Then he cleared his throat. "I am very sorry that your parent passed. They were – I am sure they were good people."

Anima

“How would you even know that?” she snapped, trying desperately to stop her tears.

“Because they raised you,” he said.

She blinked and frowned at him. “You do not know me.”

“I know enough.”

“No, you do not!” she snapped, glad for the anger that kept her grief at bay. “You ripped me out of my life and brought me here and, and....”

“And made you Queen,” he said simply. His eyes never left hers as he approached and reached for her hands. She was so overwhelmed she just let him take them. He raised them to his mouth and kissed her knuckles, never breaking eye contact. She knew she should be awed. But all she could feel was a boiling rage twisted with teeth-chattering fear. “Joyce, no matter what you may feel, this is real. You are here, and here is very different to your world. Here, we have learned to accept what we cannot change. Fighting it only brings pain and steals peace. Right now, the thing we cannot change is that we have been thrown together, and we must publicly be seen to be together for the good of my people and our own safety. I understand that you are afraid. I wish I could change it, but I cannot. For tonight, at least, you must become Anima. You must become the lioness who will rule her people. And you must do so in the furs of a desired and strong woman. I promise the flames and the smoke will help, but until we get there, you must pretend. Show a stronger front than you feel. I will be here, and I will not let you fall. But where the choices are yours, the words and actions will measure you for what you do and say. You must accept this and walk into the new life the creator has given you. One step at a time, and this is your first step.”

She took a deep breath and swallowed all the feelings back. Then she took her hands back. Then she turned to the clothing on the bed and sighed again.

“Excellent, Joyce,” Sung said.

While she leaned down to take off her high heels, he returned to the closet and shrugged off the vest he had been wearing with its lion’s mane collar. As he hung it up, his back was revealed in the light of the lanterns; Joyce swallowed.

His muscles gleamed, crawling like ladders from his trim waist to the vast expanse of his shoulders. The spine line made a deep crease down the centre of his back. But here and there,

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all over his body, his smooth skin was marred by white, puckered scars, some in deep, parallel lines, like claws. Others in half-moon punctures like teeth. And one at his shoulder blade made Joyce swallow to imagine what must have caused it.

Then he unbuckled his belt and shoved his pants down, and Joyce's eyebrows shot up. She turned, trying to ignore the clinking and rustling sounds coming from where he stood; that must mean he was removing all his clothing.

"I... uh... is there a room where I could change?" she said faintly.

Sung chuckled. "I will keep my back turned until you tell me otherwise, princess. But this is one thing you will need to become accustomed to; the Anima are unashamed of our bodies."

Joyce thought that she would probably be unashamed if she looked like that. She swallowed hard. "It is not... I just..."

He turned only his head to meet her eyes for a silent breath.

"You are safe here. I will not disrespect your wishes and look. Take your time," then he turned back to the closet and muttered something under his breath that sounded like he had said sweet girl, but she could not be sure.

Joyce looked at the clothing on the bed that amounted to not much more than a bikini. His words from a moment before echoed in her head. Here, we have learned to accept what we cannot change. Fighting it only brings pain and steals peace...

She shook with fear and frustration and rage. She let the unfairness of it all wash over her for a moment. She would give herself just one slow breath to feel it, then push it away and try to accept it. But before she had taken that second breath, Sung's voice rose softly from behind her.

"For what is worth, Joyce, I am truly sorry that you were brought here against your will."

She did not answer; she did not know what to say. Did not think there was anything she could say. So, she lifted her hands in a desperate shrug and unbuttoned her blouse.

It was not until later that she realised he had not said he was sorry she was there. Only that she had been brought against her will.

Anima

SUNG

The look on her face set his teeth like a cub that had lost its pride and saw its death in the winds. Which, in a way, he supposed was true; she had unbuttoned three buttons on the silky shirt she wore before she looked up and met his eyes.

His eyes widened, and he turned quickly back to the closet. "Apologies."

She gave a little huff laced with humour, and he grinned, though he prayed she could not tell. The sound of her clothing and smell soon worked on his body, already taut with the night's tensions and knowing what would come. As he pulled his kilt out of the closet and began to wrap it around his waist, he spoke more to cover the sounds of her than because he needed to say it.

"Being my mate will come with great responsibility, but it will also provide you a great deal," he said quietly. "Humans in Anima live longer than those in their own world. And as my queen, you can live out your days here; you will not be required to share a home with pride or work for your living. You will be free to pursue whatever you were made to do."

"What if I do not know what I was made to do?" she said in a small voice. "Never mind, do not answer that. I need to stop looking ahead because it is hard to figure out what I am supposed to do right now. Tell me about this wedding ceremony or whatever it is. What will I have to do? Is it anything like our weddings where I am from?"

He chuckled. "No, nothing like those," he said. "The mating ceremony is a declaration of intention. In our world, nothing worth having is gained without fighting for it."

"Fighting?"

"Not in the way you think, do not worry," he reassured her. She had stopped moving at the word, so he put his hands up and cursed that he could not turn around to soothe her. "I did not mean to frighten you. The ceremony is... theatre. It has roots in our animal ancestry, but the intention is to ensure everyone knows who belongs to whom. Think of it as the Anima equivalent of an engagement ring; whoever sees it knows you are taken."

"Why do you sound like you want to laugh?" she said darkly. "Are you messing with me?"

"Not at all," he assured her. "I was thinking of Lucan's face when he watches me kiss you later tonight."

"Kiss?"

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Sung clawed his hand through his hair and cursed himself for speaking without thinking. “Like a wedding kiss, Joyce... a statement of our union. Something to show the other males that you are not to be touched. That is all.”

Joyce shoved out a breath and muttered something he chose not to hear. “Anything else? What do I have to do?”

“You simply have to choose me,” he said, his voice gruffer than he had intended, the idea much pricklier than he had realised. “When the time comes, if I have protected you and shown myself worthy, you just have to choose me over the others.”

“Worthy? On what planet would you not be worthy of me? Surely you mean it the other way around?”

He started to turn at the pure shock in her voice, then caught himself, his hands clenched into fists. He needed to see, read, and think through his words.

“You can turn around,” she said with a sigh.

“Thank you,” he rumbled and turned. “The worthiness is only a matter of,” he had kept his eyes down, just in case. He had expected her to shrink in on herself, covering herself with her hands or looking uncomfortable. He planned to give her space if she felt self-conscious in the clothing much more revealing than she’d been used to.

Instead, when he lifted his eyes, he found a proud woman standing with her feet shoulder-width apart. She had fur hugging her breasts and an angled fur across her hips and thighs that was just snug enough to hint at the curves underneath. Instead of positioning herself with the loose, suggestive air that most women would have adopted if she stood in his bedroom like that, Joyce stood with her hands on her hips, which only emphasised her waist and stared at him with a fixed jaw and a light in her eyes that made him wary when he saw it in any female. It looked like he would pay if he said the wrong thing.

Sung mentally scanned back through the last moments of the conversation. He had only spoken about her choosing him. Why would that get her angry? What had he said to her that would make her angry?

Human women were strange. She had him tied in knots, and she was not even trying.

“Well?” she snapped.

Anima

"I am sorry; what did you ask me?" he said, then cleared his throat. She was stunning when she was not cowering.

"I said, on what planet would I have to choose you? You are the king. You are the rutting stag. I am the... what did they call me? The weak human? The coward? Why would the choice be mine?"

"Because you are the female," he said, confused. Had he so severely misunderstood the mating rituals in the human world? "The female always chooses.." he cleared his throat again and scratched the back of his neck. Her sensitivity to the subject was beginning to rub off on him, which was ridiculous. "In the animal kingdom, it is always the same. The males either fight for the female favour or demonstrate their ability to provide. In the end, it is always the females who choose their mates. We are not animals. But old instincts die hard. As king, of course, I have a choice. But when I have made one... it is up to her, to you to accept me."

Joyce shook her head slowly. 'This is crazy,' she breathed. "I can't do this."

"Of course, you can," he said gruffly. "All you have to do is turn down any offers, then accept mine."

"Offers? What offers?"

He rolled his eyes. "It's theatrical, like I said. But during the ceremony, other males will try to take your attention from me. Simply refuse them," he paused and indicated his chest. "Let us be honest; you would be crazy not to," he winked at her; then, her eyes flashed with humour for a split second. But it died as quickly as it appeared, and she looked uncertain again.

Sung sighed and approached her, lightly touching her upper arms.

"Look at me, Joyce," he said. When she did, he held her gaze. Her eyes were a blue so deep and bright they were almost purple. He remembered them from her childhood. He ached to stroke her face, but he knew she was pulled tighter than a toad net. He could not do anything to trigger her panic. "We will go to the flames," he said softly. "And there will be long boring speeches about the king's pleasure, blah, blah, blah. Then they will put herbs on the fire that create a haze of smoke that is... intoxicating. It will free your mind and your inhibitions. And then the males will try to tempt you; it's all for show. But in Anima, it has a purpose by forsaking others; you show your willingness to mate for life. Then, when I fight for you, I show my

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willingness to fight to keep you. And at the end, when I am the only man standing, you choose me, we kiss, and then we will leave.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

Joyce blew out another breath, then nodded. “I can do that.”

“I know you can. I hope you can do that soon because we need to get out there.”

“Okay,” her shoulders rose and fell slowly. “One last question?”

“Sure.”

She swallowed. “What are you getting out of this?”

Anima

The dance, Meat market, Mate

Sung blinked. The question was unexpected, and no one had ever asked him that.

"I'm sorry?" he said to buy himself time.

"You said you fight for me, pretend to fight, whatever my point is... you had to do that already tonight at the rite, and now you will do it again. You said all I have to do is choose you. But why... if it is not pity... why would you choose me? What do you get out of it?"

It was on the tip of his tongue, the whole story, their history, how he knew her, why he cared about what happened to her, but the words died in his throat. He could not put that on her now, on top of everything else. Trying to explain everything made her believe he was not the one who had chosen her to come to Anima... it was too much.

So, in a flash, he told the only other truth he could. He gave her a wicked grin and leaned into her ear. "I get to stop dealing with women who look at me and see an unmated king. And, perhaps more importantly, their mothers."

Her eyes went wide. "They pressure you?"

He shrugged. "Annoy me would be closer to the truth. But yes, political pressure always exists on a leader, especially in Anima, where ancestry is so important. There are always tribes looking to improve their standing or women looking for an easy life."

"And they will stop pressuring you after tonight?"

"Yes. So, while I am sure we will have a wonderful life, Joyce, no matter what. I will be eternally grateful that you don't look at me like a prize pelt and that your presence will have stopped the others from doing it, too."

She sucked in a breath, then nodded. "Well, okay then. Let us do this. How do I look?"

"Delicious," he said honestly.

Her eyes slid from his face to his neck, chest, and abdomen, and he felt her gaze like she had dragged her fingers down his skin. The slightest hint of arousal in her scent made his groin clench. Then she swallowed, and he turned and offered her his arm before embarrassing himself.

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JOYCE

The problems only started after they put those herbs on the bonfire.

Until then, Joyce was surprised that the ceremony had almost been boring, mostly long speeches and songs punctuated by the occasional joke about the first-time mating.

But then the drums started. Reminded of the rite earlier, Joyce's heart raced, and she began to shake. Sung took her hand and leaned into her ear.

"No more killing, I promise," he whispered.

She nodded, but her heart did not slow.

Then, the woman who had questioned Sung after he chose Joyce as her mate walked forward with a large basket that she placed on the massive fire. The first curls of smoke smelled strong, but it was not offensive. It reminded her of basil or thyme. But then the smoke began to bloom, curling over itself and expanding, fingers of dark grey twisting together and waving through the air like snakes. Joyce's first inhale after it wafted over them turned into a cough, as did many people around her. But as the cloud became a haze that enveloped the entire clearing, Joyce found herself... well... buzzing.

It was an odd feeling but not unpleasant. As if everything was slightly unreal. The night, the flames, they all had a somewhat dreamlike quality. And for the first time since she had opened her eyes in the clearing for the rite, she felt herself relaxing. She turned to look at Sung. He had a small smile as he stared down at her.

"I told you," he whispered in a rumble. "This is the fun part."

Joyce did not feel like talking, so she nodded and took another, deeper breath. The smoke pinched her throat, but the rest of her tingled deliciously. She looked down at her arm and touched it, marvelling at how even her touch made her skin fizz and the little hairs stood under her hand. Then Sung took one finger and pushed a strand of hair back from her face to behind her ear, and she shivered.

"Oh yes," he said, his voice so deep it seemed to come up from the ground. "This is the fun part."

Anima

The drums... drums were not beating a funeral march anymore. They kept the beat of a song only she could hear as if the melody floated in the smoke. When you tried to grab it, it slid through your fingers only to curl around your skin and stick to you.

A small laugh bubbled out of her throat, and she clapped her hand over her mouth. When she looked at Sung, he was grinning.

“May I have this dance?” he asked as he held his hand to her.

Unable to resist, she placed her hand in his and let him walk her forward, closer to the heat of the flames, where he pulled her into his chest until they were pinned together. He loomed over her as they swayed together.

She was about to say that she could not dance because everyone would watch when she realised everyone else was up on their feet and swaying to that distant music.

She had no idea how long they swayed, turned, and leaned more than once. Sung bent her backwards over his arm until she was stretched almost back onto her head. But instead of worrying that her tiny top would slide up or her legs might give way, she relaxed into his grip and let her skin tingle under his touch.

Her breath came faster, but not because the dance was complicated. Instead, his closeness and scent made her blood fizz like her skin did when he touched her.

Everything within her suddenly wanted more. But more of what?

She swayed, skin lighting up everywhere Sung touched her until she wanted to purr.

Then he turned her so her back was against his chest, and they swayed again. The drumbeats picked up, or maybe there were just more of them. Whatever it was, the crowd closed in until her skin was pebbled with goosebumps from the warmth and brush of countless hands and arms.

She put one of her arms up and back, looking for Sung’s neck, something to grip to keep her centred in this ocean of bodies. His hand found her wrist and slid down, down, down her arm as she arched back, lighting fireworks in her blood that followed the trail of his touch.

Then he dropped his chin to her shoulder and whispered into her ear. “One piece of advice before we go any further,” his lips brushed the shell of her ear, and she shivered.

“What is it?” she whispered back.

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“Follow your instincts.”

His heavy breath puffed across her neck, sending goosebumps down her thigh on that side.

His hand slid to her waist, and this thumb strummed her skin like a guitar.

“I am a human. I do not have instincts,” she gasped, leaning back against his chest wall.

“Yes, you do,” he breathed, then nipped her ear lobe. “They are buried deeply, but they are there. Follow your instincts, follow your gut, do not doubt yourself, and do not doubt me,” he rasped.

“Why would I doubt y-” she had not even finished the words when his warm solidness disappeared behind her. She began to topple backwards but was quickly caught by another set of hands, another warm, broad chest.

Joyce was about to protest but stopped when she felt his fingers dance down her side in a sparkle of sensation that left her breathless.

“Who?”

As quickly as the man had appeared, he was gone and replaced by another. And as the effects of the smoke heightened her senses, it also dulled her fear until Joyce found herself dancing, turning, swaying from man to man...

Anima

SUNG

At first, he worried she was too weak for the smoke and had been overcome. Feeling and rippling in his arms had been intoxicating even without the smoke. But when he was forced to give her up to the males, every instinct in him roared against it. Wrong, wrong, wrong!

It had been an act of sheer will to let her go instead of pressing closer. But he knew they needed this: his people, him, and Joyce.

Everyone needed to know where they stood. And the ceremony would provide that.

As long as she did not lose her mind.

His eyes followed her, the eye at the centre of a storm of male bodies, hands and smiles. At first, she gave herself up, swaying and dancing, her arms over her hands, sliding on the nearest shoulder, whomever it might be.

Despite the smoke, he tensed, and only Erwin's restraining hand on his arm kept him from diving in and ruining his mating ceremony.

"Caution, brother," Erwin murmured, his fingers tight on Sung's bicep. "I know it is hard, but just watch. And let your scent go all to her."

Sung grunted. If it were not for the smoke, the entire city would be smelling him by now: his frustration, tension, and desire.

One of the men wrapped a hand possessively at her waist, and Sung snarled.

Erwin stepped into his eyeline and would not move until Sung started to meet his eye.

"We all went through it, Sung. I will admit that I doubted your commitment; I thought this was a convenience. Or a plot, but I can see and smell it in you. Be well, brother. Watch, call to her."

Then, with a hand of comradery right where Sung's shoulder met his neck, that also just happened to be placed perfectly to catch him should he try to move. Erwin turned him to face where Joyce was, now even more surrounded as even the younger, unestablished males began to stalk her.

Sung's entire body went rigid.

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Sung wanted to tear every man's throat out, but Joyce seemed to find a coherent thought for the first time. She turned her head as one male trailed his fingers through her hair. She was searching for something. Sung swallowed, silently pleading with her to look in his direction.

And she did; finally, her eyes caught on his and widened as another male, one of Erwin's warriors, stepped between them, so tall he blocked her view. He swayed momentarily and seemed to lean into her ear, but then she appeared, dancing around him, her steps lost and shaky. Another man slid into her path, his hand at her waist and neck, and she paused, looking at him, distracted. But as he rolled his hips and pulled her in, she slipped around him and came forward again.

Again and again, the men tried to tempt, distract, and seduce her. But like a thread braided between sticks, she always found a way around them, or between them, until there were no doubts she was walking towards Sung. And with every step, her eyes cleared, and her legs became stronger.

Sensing the shift in her, how she had found her focus, the males stopped stroking and tempting her. Instead, they began to circle, creating a barrier she would struggle to reach. They closed the gap the first time she tried to slide between them; instead, she glared at them and pushed one aside.

"Good girl... that is it," Sung murmured under his breath, letting her see him watch and want her close.

Erwin clapped him on the shoulder and chuckled.

"Good luck, my friend," he said.

"For what?" Sung said without taking his eyes off Joyce.

"For surviving the wrath of that woman when she sees you pawed by half the city," he laughed.

"I will wait; what?" Sung tore his eyes away from Joyce to find Erwin grinning at him, tipping his head to their right, where a dozen females prowled closer with every breath.

Damn! He had forgotten about that part.

The wolves were always the first to stake their claims. When the first female reached him, she was a lupine. She didn't touch him immediately but looked at him through her lashes and

Anima

swayed, bringing her body close to his. Her breasts barely brushed his abdomen as she turned, then let her backside rest against his groin as she arched back against him, humming her approval.

Sung had thought himself virtually untouched by the smoke, but his skin responded to the touches. Dramatically, he groaned as the woman growled in her throat and slid one of her hands between them. He caught her wrist only just in time.

But even as she snarled her displeasure at his rejection, four other hands landed on his shoulders, back, and hair.

Where the males had tried to seduce Joyce, to tempt her, the females were far more forward, knowing that his flesh would betray him. One of them had even approached bare from the waist up, one hand circling her breast as she stared at him with a wicked smile.

Sung groaned and tore his eyes away, searching for Joyce, who was still navigating through her sea of bodies. Joyce was now almost through all the men, so those at the back of the crowd were giving up and beginning to stand back and watch.

But then, just as their eyes met and Joyce's flashed with relief, Sung felt a hand between his legs and snarled, whirling to find the violator.

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JOYCE

When the smoke poured over them, she found Sung's touch electrifying, then he disappeared, and her body betrayed her. She had been distracted by the other men whose eyes were lit up, their hands trailing over her skin and hair, and that tingling was delicious. But their touch lacked the thrill she had found in Sung's, and she wanted it back.

She had been confused, turning to find him, but he was gone, and another set of eyes, another pair of hands had found her. It was distracting, but not for long. She pushed past, weaved through, always looking for him. It was as if she could sense his presence. Somehow, she had known what direction to take even when she could not see him. Even when the touches of the males were alight on her skin, something inside kept tugging her towards him.

Then their eyes met, and she took her first deep breath since the smoke began. Something in her chest tugged, and a yearning bloomed inside her.

She took another step, beginning to smile, but suddenly, another man was in the way, this one more insistent. It took her a moment to find a way around him. But after him, another male stood shoulder to shoulder, forcing her to find a way through.

And when she finally did, Sung was surrounded. There were women everywhere close to him, five or six deep, and those closest to him pawed at him as if he were a toy, their hands on his shoulders, sliding down his back, even in his hair!

Joyce stumbled forward, intending to push her way through that pull within her, yanking now, demanding that she get closer. But when she reached the circle of women, those closest turned on her, hissing, growling, eyeing her. They would have had their ears flat against their heads if they had been cats.

And they spoke in hushed whispers and muttered curses.

"Weak woman, he is not for you; he needs someone so much stronger than you."

"You do not belong here. We will make sure you never succeed."

"Human woman, you do not have what it takes to handle a king!"

"Child. You are nothing but a child."

"A coward, that is what you are, taking our king through deception and fear!"

Anima

On and on and on, her worst fears, thoughts and her confusion, all whispered in her ear, hissed to her heart. And Joyce felt herself want to falter and question.

She searched for Sung, but most of the women were so much taller than her that she was pushing between them on instinct alone.

Then, suddenly, there was a roar from the centre, a raging snarl, and the circle of women loosened for a moment. Joyce saw her chance and darted through a small gap between two women who were so broad that they looked like males from the back.

The circle closed again quickly, but Joyce could see him now, his eyes wide and darting as he whirled and cuffed at hands that reached for him. He turned from naked bodies that wanted to press against him and always, his eyes, left and right until they landed on her and they spoke her name.

She could not hear him over the women surrounding her, but she saw his mouth make her name and sighed, pushing forward again.

Then, a pair of lips pressed against her ear.

“A lovesick fool with no spine, the wolves would end you the first chance we get!” the voice hissed.

Joyce hesitated, turning to find the woman who had spoken, but there were several so close they could have leaned in and, all of them shifting to try to stand between her and Sung, their eyes narrowed and sharp.

She had seen those looks before and knew what they meant. It seemed the language between women did not change between worlds.

These women wanted him for themselves. And they would fight to keep her away from them.

She stopped mid-step and looked for Sung again, finding him with her eyes, his wild and rolling. But when he caught her, he paused; there was a crystalline moment between them, eyes locked, where it felt like something in him spoke to something in her.

But then a woman, her back to Joyce, slid her hand down his chest, and Joyce saw Sung's body recoil when she found what she was looking for. He roared again, twisting. But now there

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were more women, all holding him, stroking him, pressing against him. He was overrun with insufficient hands to remove all those touching him.

Joyce trembled.

She felt the violation, the sheer injustice that, as a male, he was expected to take that kind of abuse without complaint.

A noise tore out of her throat, and she shoved forward, heedless of the hands that gripped her arms or the body trying to stand in her way. She called his name and fought, tooth and nail, scratching, shoving, kicking, to force the woman back.

She could see his rigid shoulders, the veins popping in his neck, on his arms. And Sung fought, too. He fought but with concern, not to harm those abusing him. He fought for his freedom but not at the cost of the women hurting him.

Well, fuck that, Joyce thought and threw herself into the fray.

She pulled hair, scratched, took more than one elbow to the ribs, and gave a couple of her own until there was only one woman between her and Sung.

Two women on either side fought to keep hold of his arms so the woman in front could kiss and lick at his chest and neck. He roared, and something in Joyce snapped.

She grabbed the woman by the hair and threw her to the ground, putting herself between the woman and Sung.

“Keep your hands off, my mate!” she screamed in a voice she did not recognise. Many of those watching stepped back. The two women who held Sung’s arms went wide-eyed as Joyce turned on them. “Let him go.”

The woman on the left dropped his arm immediately, bowing to her. The woman on her right bared her teeth and hissed a curse.

Joyce sucked in a breath and more smoke with it and turned to Sung.

“Do you want her?” she yelled over the rushing in her ears.

“No!” Sung roared back. Joyce’s heart leapt, but she turned back to the woman who was almost a foot taller and stronger.

Then she remembered what Sung had said. Listen to your instincts.

Anima

Her instinct was to kick this woman's ass for touching her mate. No one touched her mate except her.

It filled her then, the yearning, the thrill and the fire-eating rage. Joyce's chin dropped, but her eyes never left the woman's.

The woman crouched to meet her but had both hands busy, holding Sung's arm. Joyce snarled at her and stalked forward, eyes locked on the woman with her teeth gritted but not looking away.

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SUNG

Watching Joyce stare down a dominant lioness was the sexiest thing Sung had ever seen. As she stalked forward, eyes flaming, hips rolling like a big cat's, he wanted to lift her into his arms and take her back to the cave and to hell with the ceremony. And her scent... was always delicious, but there was a new thread now, something hot and prickly, something that wanted.

His own body responded. He was panting and not because of fighting off women. A growl vibrated in his throat, and Joyce's skin pebbled; he could see it and smell that high in her, the wave of desire and possessiveness she was giving herself to.

He could not stop the mating huff from his throat, the deepest of his calls and one he had never made before. The entire clearing hushed.

The call erupted from his throat so deep it came from his toes. It ordered the other males around the fire to hear and submit. They all fell back, away from Sung and Joyce, giving the women room. Both of the females were giving up, too. A moment later, only the lioness that challenged Joyce remains. As Sung would have liked to tear his arm out of the female's grip, this had to be Joyce's fight. He watched her continue to stalk towards the woman touching him, repeated the call, and saw her chest rise and fall in response.

She padded over to the woman, so close her scent was strong despite the smoke, and Sung huffed again. Without taking her eyes off the other female, she lifted a hand to his chest and spoke through her teeth.

"Let go of him," she said through her teeth.

"Why?"

Joyce blinked. "Because he is my mate. You are handling my mate as he belongs to you."

"But you do not want him," the woman growled.

"You know nothing about what I want," Joyce shot back.

"You would not even fight for him!"

"I am now."

The lioness sneered, her eyes narrowed, and her hands clawed into his forearm hard enough to leave half-moon cuts where her nails pierced his skin. "He deserves more than a queen in name only. He is king. He deserves a mate, a wife, a partner and -"

Anima

“He will choose for himself what he wants. We are talking about what I want. And I want your hands off him. Right now!”

Sung felt... proud. Joyce stood, her hands in fists, her chest and shoulders heaving with her breath, and the lioness trembled. She was the dominant female of the pride, a wise woman, and one of his dearest friends, but Joyce didn't know that.

She only knew what she felt and what the smoke was giving her the courage to speak. He hoped she would choose him truthfully, not just in name.

“I do not want to see more blood on the ground tonight,” Joyce snarled. “But if that is what it will take-”

“It won't,” his friend sighed. “But know that you choose a good man, one of the best of our kind. If you do not appreciate him, there are many that would happily take your place.”

Joyce stepped forward so they were chest to chest, though she was several inches shorter.

“Let them try.”

And her scent was rock-hard. Certain, unshakeable.

Sung roared, and his people called back, breaking into a shuffling dance that circled them as the lioness faded into the crowd, and he pulled Joyce into his chest.

She was trembling. Not untouched by fear, he realised, but staring it down and moving ahead anyway.

True courage.

“You are amazing,” he whispered into her ear. He pulled back far enough to meet her wide eyes as the people circled them, shifting, calling and weaving, leaving a few feet of space around them.

Traditionally, the dance recognised the couple's belonging to the people but even more to each other. He knew she did not appreciate what was happening but found he did not care as she never took her eyes off him, and she let her head drop back as he buried his hands in her hair and kissed her open-mouthed.

She clung to his shoulders and kissed him back, and the crowd called again.

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

She didn't know what was happening to her. She felt driven to be close to him, tingling at his touch, desperate for his kiss. She did not know this man, yet somehow, she did. Something in him called to her, and she could not deny it.

When he kissed her tenderly and took in the same breath, her knees shook even worse than the rest. She wished they were alone. She wished she understood what was happening to her body. But she was sure of one thing. She did not want to be away from him. Not yet.

So, when he finally groaned and broke off the kiss, roaring to his people, they all shouted, cawed or growled back. She dropped her forehead to his broad, flat chest, letting her hands trail up his sides.

She felt him twitch under her touch, and a spear of desire shot through her belly. It took her breath. Everything in her yearned to lean into him, get closer, and touch him more, yet something held her back. This place was impossible; everything that had happened in the past few hours... she could not trust anything, not herself.

As if he felt her falter, Sung wrapped his arms around her and shifted her closer. She could feel his heartbeat against her temple as their chest rose and fell in time.

There, inside his arms, with her eyes closed, the drums. The colours in the dark all faded until she was aware of his heartbeat, how his skin felt under her fingertips, and his warmth in the chilly night. She felt peaceful for the first time she had opened her eyes in the clearing for the rite.

Then he stroked a hand through her hair, and her skin came alive again. She wanted him, she swallowed hard, but it was true.

She wanted him.

She had never really wanted a man before.

How had this happened? Was it just because of the smoke?

Unable to answer the questions for herself, she pulled her head back. He released her immediately, but she did not step out of his massive arms. She just leaned back to meet his eyes. He stared down at her.

Anima

The feral light in his eyes had only increased during the ceremony, but his tenderness was also in his touch and gaze. He used one finger to draw her hair back from her face and looked a question at her, his nostrils flaring.

“I am glad it is you,” she whispered.

He blinked, and his bottom lip fell open. He searched her eyes as if not sure he had understood. But she could not explain it. It was just... true.

So, she dropped her head to his collarbone again and sighed.

His fingers trailed up her neck, raising goosebumps in their wake, his arm cradling her back. She felt his chin resting on her head and suddenly wanted to cry.

What was happening to her?

She shivered, and his arms tightened.

“Do you wish to leave?” He asked quietly, his voice a deep, rich hum in his chest under her ear. She nodded. “Then you need to be strong for a few more minutes, Joyce?” She sighed heavily and raised her head to look at him. His forehead was lined with concern, but his eyes were gentle. “We have to fight our way out,” he said with a lopsided smile. When she tensed, he held her tighter. “Not like that. Just... a show, I think... Maybe you should get on my back and let me do the swinging? Do you have enough strength left to hold on?” She did not, but she would do it anyway. But her voice failed her. She nodded, and a shadow passed behind his eyes, but he touched her face. “Just a few more minutes, then we will be in the quiet,” he said.

When she nodded again, he sighed and let her go. She felt cold and wanted him back immediately.

Chapter Three

Why me? Not the wedding night of choice, Crossed wires, Those damned wolves

When she nodded again, he sighed and let her go. She felt cold and wanted him back immediately, but he dropped to a crouch in front of her, one hand splayed on the ground to brace himself, the other leaning on his thigh. He looked up at her with such delight that she was breathless.

He was a massive man and muscular, every part of his body honed for strength. And he crouched in front of her like a child waiting for orders in a game.

Joyce blinked. She was suddenly overcome by a fierce feeling of déjà vu. She had seen him in this position before and had known him in a different time and place... but it was gone as fast as the feeling came.

"Joyce, are you well?" he murmured.

She blinked and returned to the moment, realising he was waiting for her.

"I am sorry," she breathed. "I just..."

"Do not worry. Hop on; I will get you out of here," he said with a wicked grin so adorable that she could not help but smile back.

Circling his large frame, she looked at his back sceptically. Even crouched, he was huge, and it was not like she had a step ladder. She would become aware of the people nearby, circling, watching and smiling.

Then Sung put his free hand backwards, cupped as if to take her knee, and he said over the stomp and shuffle of the feet around them.

"Just lean into my back, and I will lift you."

Joyce blew a piece of hair out of her face and, for a moment, was struck by just how beautiful he was, his broad back lined in muscle, that divot down his spine.

If the girls from her classes could see him, they would shriek at her to stop delaying. She knew it.

For once, she was going to listen.

Anima

Swallowing hard, she leaned into his back, putting her arms around his neck and her chin where his neck met the broad plane of his shoulder.

His fingers slid from her ankle, up the back of her leg, to the knee, and then he stood, pulling her higher as he reached his full height.

She hugged his warmth and giggled, but her head spun from the smoke, and her body shook.

“Do not worry, Joyce; I will not let you fall.” His voice rumbled against her breasts, and she swallowed for different reasons, feeling him tense beneath her. “hold on!” was all he said.

Laurie Bowler

SUNG

He could feel her breasts pressed against his back, and desire rose like a fire in his belly. As soon as he had her secure and began to move, the crowd turned to face them.

The fight to leave the ceremony was traditional and supposed to be little more than play. But Sung noticed more than one face set in disapproval or anger, and more than one wolf snuck an elbow or fist to his ribs hard enough to leave a bruise.

Joyce buried her face in his neck and just held on.

It only took a few minutes for him to break through the circling mass and reach the edge of the fire's light and the smoke. When he did, he turned and roared, and his people answered mostly with genuine excitement. Then he turned for the path to his cave, made eye contact with Erwin as he stepped out of the smoke, and started to jog through the trees.

His head cleared immediately, but he could feel Joyce's shaking increase the closer they got to the cave. For the first time, it occurred to him that the smoke might affect a human differently than it did the Anima. He prayed she was not overcome and made a mental note to have one of the guards call a healer if her head did not clear soon.

It was only minutes until they rounded the crevice in the mountain and his clearing opened before them that he considered putting her down. Still, he enjoyed how she clung to his neck. And the way she was trembling, he wondered whether she could keep her footing without help.

So, after a quick turn to lock eyes with Erwin and make sure the guards were in place to guard the cave, he ducked under the lip of the cave mouth and stepped inside. He did not let Joyce down until they had made it to the great room, and he could slide her onto the wide bench seat in front of the fire.

When seated, he knelt before her, touching her face to test for fever but just because he wanted to touch her.

She continued to tremble in waves, but her eyes were clear and free of tears, for which he was grateful. She had been through a lot.

Anima

Then she met his eyes, and something in her gaze raised his hackles and made him want to growl to check for an intruder. But when he moved to stand up, to turn and look, she put a hand to his face and looked into his eyes.

“No, don’t go anywhere,” she whispered.

He froze, still kneeling in front of her, searching her eyes that were red from the smoke, but not badly so. When she did not speak, he cupped her face again.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded. “I shouldn’t be. But I am. I feel... safe when you are close, Sung,” she whispered. “What is happening to me? Why do I feel like I know I can trust you? I don’t even know you! Was there something in that smoke that-”

“Shhhh, no, sweet one. It heightens your senses and relaxes you. But it does not change you. I promise you have not been tricked. Is your head clear now? Can you think?”

“Yes,” she breathed, staring at her fingers as she curled them, her nails catching on the stubble on his jaw. “That’s why I am wondering... the way I feel... the way I’m thinking... it doesn’t make sense.”

Sung chuckled, and her eyes flashed. He could smell desire spike in her and resolved to chuckle far more often in her company.

“I told you to follow your instincts,” he said quietly. “That’s all you are doing.”

Her breathing picked up, though he doubted she would know he was aware of it. She blinked and swallowed, then moved her hands to his bare chest, her fingers trailing from his jaw to the flat spot right over his heart, and she followed them with her eyes.

Sung’s breathing may have also picked up a little under her touch.

“Why did you choose me?” she asked quietly, then brought her eyes up to meet his.

Sung went very still. It was an opportunity to tell her of their history to give her the gratitude she was due for the kindness and love she had shown a young and frightened heir to the throne. And again, he almost spoke the words.

But the lines on her forehead spoke of the stress she still felt.

The shadows in her eyes shouted her questions.

Laurie Bowler

And her human nature, usually so cynical and suspicious of anything outside their standard order, would tell her it was impossible that he had not known they were bringing her. Though it was true.

No, she needed to know Anima better before he explained that.

She was still frowning at him, waiting for an answer. But instead, he took her hand and kissed her knuckles.

“You may be different from our kind, Joyce, but you are one of us. I watched the wolf in you make a plan and stick to it. I watched the steed in you push forward even when you were exhausted. And I watched the lion in you roar. Ignore the taunts and questions of my people. They have not yet looked closely enough to see what I see. You will find your place here. You will be an excellent queen.”

“But... why me?”

Sung sighed. “I did not choose the sacrifices, Joyce. You can ask any Anima, and they will tell you the clans choose, each in their own way. And the choice of the pure one is always given to the strongest clan below the kings. I did not know you would be in the circle tonight, but once I saw you there... had it been up to me, I would have chosen you then.” It was pure truth, but it confused her profoundly, puckering a little V between her brows.

“But... why?”

Sung shrugged. “Who can explain it beyond the creator? Some people are meant to be together. Tonight, we learned that we are. I cannot answer why... I can only tell you that I am certain of it.”

“You learned that tonight?” she said, a hint of hope in her tone.

“Didn’t you?” he asked softly, surprised by the tenderness in his chest. As if she could bruise him with the wrong answer.

“I thought it was just smoke. I thought it made us all feel... good.”

He shook his head. “I have never felt that certainty before. I have been in dozens of ceremonies. Touched hundreds of females with the smoke outside it. Never had trouble controlling myself.”

She frowned, and he wondered what he had said wrong.

Anima

“What control did you lose?” she asked.

Sung chuckled again. “A dear friend had to put a hand on me to stop me from tearing you out of all those males' grip. He could feel how close I was to the edge. He said he had felt the same way when he and his wife were mated. It is a sign of... rightness.”

She nodded, and something in her eased. Sung waited, letting her think through everything she had seen. When her eyes drifted back up to his, he held his breath.

“So, we are married now?” she said, her voice husky.

Sung sucked in his breath and kept his hands clenched on his thighs so he would not grab her. “Yes.”

Her eyes cut to his mouth when he spoke, and her desire spiked again. Sung wanted to roar, but he kept himself very still. He did not wish to frighten her. Let her come like the doe in the forest, picking her way carefully, alert.

Her eyes trailed down his neck and chest again to where her hand still rested on him. His skin hummed when she stroked him there, just once. Then she locked eyes with him again.

Sung could barely breathe. But he was unsure if her signs would be like an Anima woman. It was always the females' choice.

Any Anima female would have leapt on him like a frog by now. He had heard that human women were much more careful; they lived in a world where the choice was often taken from them. A thought that made Sung want to bite something.

No, he could not urge her. Had to let her choose for herself.

She dropped her eyes again, watched herself stroke his chest first, then slid her hand up to cup his neck in a way that made him pray she would kiss him. But then she met his eyes again and... nothing.

The silence between them stretched until she finally sighed and pulled her hand back to her lap. It was as if she had turned off a light. Everything in her darkened, and Sung grieved it.

“Thank you... thank you for caring about how I feel. For making me safe,” she said quietly, though Sung was off-balance now because she sounded sad.

He curled his hands into fists again, but this time, he did it to stop himself from grabbing her and pulling her back to his chest.

Laurie Bowler

What had gone wrong? Had he frightened her? Or was she simply overwhelmed?

“Are you... tired?” he asked uncertainly.

She nodded sadly, still looking at her own hands in her lap.

“I think it would be good to rest,” she said.

Sung got to his feet, offered his hand, and led her to the bedroom, where he showed her the sleeping platform attached to his, but it had its level and space.

He thought he caught her looking at the main bed directly above it. But when he looked again, she had turned to the furs he had shown her.

Minutes later, she was snuggled in, one hand under her chin, exclaiming over the furs' softness and warmth.

Sung ached to warm her, but instead, he tucked her in, wished her good rest, and walked to blow out all the candles and lanterns lit in the room.

Her breath became low and even almost immediately. And when he finally crawled his furs, it was with a body aching with frustrated desire and a heart that pounded for all the wrong reasons. He laid back, staring at the high, rock ceiling, one arm curled under his head, letting a low growl of self-loathing shudder in his throat.

She had wanted and chosen him, but she had not offered herself. He reminded himself she was human and would need more time to find her comfort. But deep down, he knew something was wrong. He knew he had scented her desire more than once. And her jealousy when the other females touched him. If she had chosen not to give herself, something was wrong. Something that still frightened her and caused her to be cautious. He would just have to be patient. He rolled over to look at her in the dark; his lion eyes had no trouble making out the peace now on her face. His heart swelled with the urge to protect and bring her to a place where she would look rested when she smiled at him.

But then she rolled over, fluffing the furs as she moved, and her scent washed over him. Sung groaned quietly. His desire for her had reached near-painful proportions. Before he could do anything, he would regret it, or she might fear him. He threw back his furs, grabbed his trousers and ran silently from the cave, fleeing the sight and smell of her so he would not be tempted to reach for her.

Anima

When he reached the clearing and had to stop, he had forgotten about the guard; he made an excuse about needing fresh air to clear his head of the smoke. But the men all knew and looked at him, then at each other.

He kept his chin up and his shoulders back as he ordered them to keep guard over her, then disappeared among the trees. But when he was out of sight, he let his body sag, cursing himself for letting the men see that he had left her.

It was not the wedding night he had always envisioned for his life. But, at least, he reminded himself, it was not a wedding night with Lucine as he had feared. Thank the creator for that.

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

Before she opened her eyes the following day, she was warm and comfortable in the furs. But she could smell the wildness of this place and knew it was not her imagination. She told herself that it was all a dream. And sadly, when she sat up, even though she was still in Sung's bedroom, he was nowhere to be seen. Her shoulders slumped.

She had gone to sleep heartbroken the night before. He had said they were meant to be together. And she had felt that too, which was crazy! But then she had given him every signal she knew; she had touched him, asked him not to leave, looked at his mouth and chest, stroked him... and he just stood there. Or, rather, just knelt in front of her.

That thought made her realise he must think of her like a child. She was so weak compared to these people, her senses much duller. She was less... brutal. Even when she had found her courage and stared that woman down, he had to carry her out of that crowd afterwards because she had been exhausted.

To him, to these people who have rituals where they murder each other and call it an honour to die, she must seem so innocent and timid. Such a baby. When he had stared at her for so long, touched her so sweetly, she had thought he wanted her so sweetly and felt he wanted her. But then... nothing. And no wonder no real man wanted to sleep with a child.

Her cheeks felt heated when she thought of how she had touched and pressed against him in the smoke the night before. What a fool she had made of herself! She wanted to bury herself in the furs and never speak to another person on Anima again. But she knew that was not going to work.

No, if she wanted Sung to look at her as a woman, she would have to start acting like one the way Anima defined a woman. The thought made her feel sick, but rather than focus on what that might mean or whom she might have to kill before her husband decided he wanted to sleep with her, the first step had to be getting herself out of bed.

She heaved a sigh of relief a moment later when, in a panic, she looked around the room for something to cover herself and caught sight of a pile of clothing at the end of her bed. Shaking them out, she found a pair of leather trousers, a loose pale shirt, and a long vest like Sung's except with no fur collar and, on top of them, socks and a pair of sturdy boots.

Anima

Minutes later, she found what counted as a bathroom in the rock mansion and walked through the great empty room alone. With no one there, no clocks or other choice, she pushed through the door and headed outside to see what this day held and figure out how to meet it like an adult.

The guards outside escorted her to what they called the market, which turned out to be a large, outdoor eating area where hundreds of people sat or stood near tables. Some people weaved between them, bringing plates full of juicy fruit, thin slices of meat and obviously fresh-baked bread. And the smell was heavenly! Joyce's stomach growled.

Faryth, the guard who had told her he would take her to Sung, laughed. "Maybe you are leonine after all!"

She had tried to smile, but she was suddenly aware of people staring at her, talking to their friends, and following her progress through the market. She wanted to shrink into the dirt under her shoes. She felt like her skin was too tight. But as they made their way through, she saw the raised eating area at the other end of the market and Sung at the centre of the table. His eyes followed her but without the judgement or disapproval like the others. She wished their first greeting after last tonight did not have to be public. But soon, she was up the stairs and seated next to him.

Sung, in the golden morning light, was a sight. He had strands of his hair that fell out of the leather at the nape of his neck and stood staring at her. His skin looked like burnished bronze. And his eyes were so bright; they looked golden as he took her hand and bowed over it, his eyes never leaving hers, which made her heart beat faster. But before she could say anything, he spoke first.

"Good morning," he turned to her, pointing to the woman on her other side. "Joyce, this is Talia, one of our best weavers."

Taken off guard, it took her a second to blink and realise who he was speaking to. It was the woman who had tried to help her when she woke up at the rite.

"H-hello!" Joyce said, shocked.

"Hello, Joyce. I am glad to see you made it," the woman bowed deeply as everyone nearby looked on, which made Joyce want to grab her shoulders and pull her upright.

Laurie Bowler

But Sung was staring between them. "You know each other?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes, last night," Joyce explained. "When I woke up at the rite, Talia tried to help me."

Sung turned to the woman and bowed over her hand as well.

"Thank you, Talia. You have the gratitude of your king," he said softly, meaningfully.

Talia fluttered a hand at her chest and blushed. "Oh, it was very little, majesty. I assure you."

"Still," Sung insisted, "it was a kindness that was much needed. You are an example to the kingdom. Thank you. since you have such a kind heart, could I ask you another favour?"

"Of course!" Talia's thin face brightened.

Sung smiled. "I have to meet with the security council. Perhaps you could show Joyce the city centre and explain some of our customs?"

Talia's smile froze, but she did not hesitate to bow and assure Sung that she was happy to do it.

"Thank you," Joyce said.

This woman did not want to babysit her but was doing it to please Sung. She could feel her cheeks heating, though. Could he not see that?

"Thank you," Sung repeated and turned back to his meal. Someone placed a plate of food in front of Joyce, and she started shovelling it into her mouth. She heard a small snort, and Sung nudged her.

She turned, her mouth full of the crusty bread, and met a very serious Sung staring down at her. Oh no, what had she done? Was there a prayer she was supposed to say before she ate or some other odd tradition?

Sung leaned in, and she swallowed hard to remove the mouthful. His lips brushed her ear.

"As queen, we won't allow you to run out of food, I promise," he whispered.

She slapped his shoulder as he chuckled, and her belly spun. She loved that deep, warm sound.

When he was finished laughing, he held her gaze, his eyes wrinkled by his smile.

"Good morning, wife," he murmured.

Anima

She blinked at the name and stared at him.

“Good morning,” she said breathlessly. “Did you sleep okay?” He grunted and shrugged. Judging by the dark shadows she could now see under his eyes, the answer was no, but when she remembered why, she winced and changed the subject. “You should have woken me. I would have come to the meal with you,” she said.

He flapped a hand and took another mouthful of food.

“I wanted to let you rest,” but he did not meet her eyes as he said it.

Joyce’s heart sank. They ate silently for a few minutes, Joyce desperately searching for something to talk to him about but constantly stunned as she looked around at everything. The food looked familiar and delicious, but only some were recognisable. These people seemed entirely human but moved and sounded differently. The clothing was somehow refined but also sparse: no shoes, only natural linens and leathers, feathers or flowers in the hair of the women.

Then she turned to look at Sung for a moment; she was struck again with the sense that she had seen him before and knew him. Only now, she was not overwhelmed by the events or the smoke. Now, the feeling of a familiar face, a known friend, would not leave her and chewed at her insides when she could not place him. He took a mouthful of food just as she cleared her throat.

“You said you had been to my world, the human world. Did we ever meet when you were?”

Sung coughed and almost spat a mouthful of food across the table. The next minute was full of him choking, one of the guards slapping him on the back, the nervous faces staring, waiting to make sure their king was not about to suffocate. Eventually, he raised his glass towards those seated at the ground level and croaked through teary eyes.

“All is well!” As the people all smiled and returned to their meals and tasks, he continued to choke and clear his throat. Several minutes before, he turned to her. “I am sorry for the interruption. What was it you said?” he asked hoarsely.

She frowned at him. “I said when you were in the human world, did we ever....”

“Majesty! I apologise for the interruption, but we need your ear immediately.”

Laurie Bowler

Joyce and Sung both turned to find a young man standing behind them. Joyce did not recognise him, but Sung did.

“Of course, of course, son. Do not worry, I will come. Joyce, dear, my apologies for leaving you alone this morning, but there are some things I have to deal with from yesterday. Talia will show you around, and I will see you at the evening meal,” he cupped her face and smiled, but before she could respond, he was gone.

Like he was glad to have gotten away.

Anima

SUNG

As he abandoned his new wife and her very inconvenient questions, Sung stalked after the guard, cursing himself as every kind of coward and liar. After everything she had been through, she deserved better. But the interruption by the guard was not a ploy. As they stalked off the market stage and down the stairs towards the Council Hall, Sung could see the young man was tensed.

“Tell me what is going on,” he said calmly. Then, I tried to focus on the young man’s briefing.

“Sire! the security council gathered early. Erwin found the wolves already there and meeting.”

“Without the council?” Sung spat.

“Yes, sir. They are... they are making trouble. Saying things...” the man eyed him from the side nervously. Sung gritted his teeth.

“One thing you will learn about me, kid, is that we do not stand on ceremony when the tribes are at risk. Whatever it is, no matter how complimentary it may be of me or not, I will never punish you for speaking the truth.”

The boy swallowed and nodded. “They are saying... they are saying you did not mate the queen, sir,” the poor boy blushed. “So, her throne is still... open.”

“What?” Sung snarled.

The boy blinked but did not flinch. Sung picked up his pace. “What else are our wolf brothers deciding for me and my throne?”

“There was mention of a King’s Council,” the boy murmured, looking left and right to make sure no one else was close enough to hear him.

Sung blinked and forced himself not to show his rage. It was not the kid’s fault he had been sent to tell Sung the bad news.

At its heart, a King’s Council was a call for the people to review a king’s dominance and an opportunity for challenges to his throne. If the security council decided to call a King’s committee, they would describe how and why Joyce was the pure one and attempt to convince the people to reject him as their King or, failing that, to reject Joyce as their queen.

Laurie Bowler

He was going to have to tell her. If she found out from someone else, she would think he had lied to her, and she would never trust him...

He was not concerned about losing his throne; the wolves were dreaming if they thought the people would support that. But Joyce? Sung found he was suddenly terrified at the idea of losing his wife.

"Take me to them," was all he said. The boy nodded and began to jog, Sung right on his heels.

Anima

JOYCE

After Sung disappeared with the young guard, Joyce turned to Talia, who was frowning, watching her King run away from the breakfast table. Then, when he was out of sight, she turned to Joyce and considered her.

“Do you care for him?” Talia asked simply.

“Yes,” Joyce breathed. “But I don’t know how to make him care for me,” she said, her voice breaking.

“Are you willing to work hard? To become one of us?”

“Do I have any other choice?” That was not the answer Talia was looking for. The woman folded her arms and frowned. Joyce ran a hand through her hair in frustration. “I only meant that... regardless of my feelings for him, which are real, I have to make a life here. He told me I couldn’t go back. I don’t want to be this... child in his eyes. But even if I cannot make him love me... I want to have a life.”

Talia looked down thoughtfully. A moment later, she sighed. “Let go”, she said, pushing her chair out and getting up.

Joyce followed uncertainly. “Go where?”

“I am going to teach you how to become Anima,” Talia said, then muttered low enough. Joyce thought she was not supposed to hear. “May the creator help us both.”

Chapter Four

The council, whispers and Eyes. One hard day and a hard night

SUNG

Sung sat in his chair in the council room, boiling with fury.

“Explain to me, please. How is that any of your business?” he said through gritted teeth to the three wolves standing before him.

Erwin and two guard members had stood a full half-hour casually earlier and placed themselves to either side of Sung. They stood loosely and did not draw weapons. Not yet, but Sung could not believe they’d even had to think they might need to protect him from council members!

The wolves rolled their eyes. Perrin, the second-in-command under Lucan, stood in the middle and was the spokesman for today. Sung had not missed that Lucan was smart enough not to be a public part of this disaster.

“You choose a human to be queen, then do not even mate her? How is that not our business?” Perrin growled. “The mating ceremony was a success- we thought. The ancestral line would be safe. But now? The entire city knows she has not taken you. It weakens your position, which weakens all of us.”

A dozen other men were in the room listening to every word. Sung prayed they were not swallowing this garbage from the wolves.

“Joyce was brought to our world, against her own will, against her knowledge and thrown into a blood rite. Then she had a mating ceremony with a stranger.”

“You are not a stranger to her!”

“To mate a virgin, I am!” Sung snarled. “If she is not ready, I will not push her!”

“Human bullshit,” Lerrin spat, and the men on either side of him shifted on their feet. “Any Anima woman, stranger or not, would have taken you in a heartbeat, and you know it. She is not one of us! She is not our queen!”

The intake of breath in the room was swift and audible. Sung was on his feet without thought, and Erwin at his shoulder before Lerrin could reconsider the wisdom of those words

Anima

that ran so dangerously close to treason. The tension in the room thickened as Sung strode up to the man, ignoring the others at his sides.

“Rethink your words, Lerrin, before I bite out your throat for treason against the crown,” he snarled.

Lerrin’s eyes were cold, but he had tensed. He had said too much, and he knew it. But he was not too slow-witted. His words made Sung turn cold.

“I spoke hastily,” Perrin growled. “But take my meaning. She comes as a stranger to us and our ways. She forced you to choose her rather than winning you, and now she denies you on your mating night?”

“Her customs are very different. She has just been through a blood rite and is a virgin. Can you blame the woman for being careful?”

“I have not been to the human world, so I do not know if I can blame her. I can blame you for bringing her to us,” Perrin said frankly. “How can we, as a people, trust a woman who lives and chooses so differently than we would? How can we follow her, not knowing where she will lead? And if you would choose her, why would we trust your judgement if she is so foreign to us, but she is what you believe is best for us?”

Sung let a low growl roll in his throat. “You trust me because I am your king, your Alpha, and I have proven myself worthy of trusting!”

Perrin stared at him without reaction for several breaths. The entire room remained silent. Sung refused to be the one to break the tension. But a part of him did not relax until Lerrin broke eye contact.

“As you say, Majesty,” he said through a tight jaw. “You have proven yourself. But let me be the first to tell you. If you are wrong in this... it will overshadow your victories.”

Sung gritted his teeth so hard they almost cracked. Sung stepped forward until he stood over the wolf-man, who submitted as he should, dropping his head and not making eye contact. But his hands were fists, and he did not step back when Sung moved into his space.

“You have been heard, wolf,” Sung snarled, his voice guttering in a growl. “Now hear me; I welcome a challenge from any man in this city. If you believe yourself to be stronger than me, smarter, and better able to lead, you just say the word, and I will happily meet you in the circle.

Laurie Bowler

We will decide dominance the way Anima always have. But do not think of undermining me through lies and plots. Take great care in seeding doubt through whispers, or you may find the ground underneath you crumbling.”

Perrin did not respond; he just stood, tense. His nostrils flared at the scent wafting off of Sung, the sheer dominance, the aggression. All the men in the room shifted at the stink of their king’s displeasure and certainty in himself. When Sung did not continue, Lerrin bowed and finally stepped back.

“You are heard and understood,” he said stiffly.

He would not challenge the king like this. He knew who the stronger man was. The question was whether he believed he and the other wolves could take the throne in the mysterious ways Sung described. Sung would not let him leave here, feeling sure of his footing.

He stepped forward again, his chin over the man’s head and snapped. “Do not allow Lucine’s failure to bring down the entire pack, Lerrin. You are more intelligent than that, and I am not dumb enough to miss how she will try to seek revenge. If one hair on my queen’s head is harmed by a wolf, the entire pack will pay in my discipline. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, Majesty.”

Sung snorted air out of his nose, an insult among the Anima that implied the person’s scent was offensive. “Leave this council and pass my message on to your people, now!”

Lerrin bowed again and turned on his heel, leading the other two wolf males out of the room. None of them looked back. Sung stayed where he had stood until they were out of the door, and it had softly closed behind them. Then he huffed the air out of his nostrils again.

But Erwin sighed. “I am not saying it was not necessary, but... I fear where this may take us, Sung,” he said softly.

Sung nodded, still staring at the door. “You and me, both. Does any other male wish to question my choice of a queen? Do we need further discussion on this?” He turned to look individually at each man in the room; the other tribes had watched quietly, not intruding. But their scents said some were afraid and others thoughtful. “Well?” Sung pushed at them.

Anima

“Not a challenge,” Erwin said carefully.

Sung raised his eyebrows. “But?”

“But... the people are not certain. They did not miss the lack of... union between you today. Do you think it will be long? How would you have us explain it to them to stop the rumours?”

“Rumors of what?” he snapped. He knew he should be grateful that his friend raised the question so the others would hear the answer. It was better than whispering about it behind their hands but hating it anyway.

“Some women say she must be barren and wish to hide it; others say she is too weak; she would not be able to carry your child. Others think there is something wrong in her head.”

“Because of one night?”

“Because none of them can imagine ever turning the king away,” Erwin grinned.

Sung snorted in amusement this time. “Remind them she has not grown up knowing me as a king. She is... less impressed with my position than they might be. Give her time. That is all that’s needed,” he replied.

As the men nodded, shrugged, and relaxed enough to move on to their everyday business, Sung took a deep breath and prayed the words were valid.

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

As Joyce and Talia left the market and began to wander the streets, Talia pointed out different shops and services. She waved greetings to people who always smiled to see her but often looked cold or scared when they nodded at Joyce. Some bowed to them, and others did not. Joyce was unsure why, but when she saw Talia bow back, she tried to copy her.

“No, no! Not like that!” Talia hissed when Joyce bowed to a woman with a leather sash over her furs.

Joyce straightened immediately, but the woman looked concerned, then ducked away behind the building they had passed.

“What did I do?” Joyce asked quietly.

Talia blew out a breath. “In Anima, our necks are the most vulnerable part of our bodies. We never bare them to each other unless we are mated or extremely close. Even within families, it is rare. So when you bow, you keep your eyes to the ground and your chin low unless you mean to tell someone you are giving them control over you.”

Joyce blinked. “Okay.”

Talia tugged at Joyce’s sleeve. “He has done a disservice throwing you into the throne before we had time to train you. Taking the queen would be hard for any female, but one who was not raised in Anima? It is an impossible task he has set!” she muttered. She stayed quiet. But as they walked further and Talia stayed quiet, obviously worried, Joyce spoke up.

“Why would it be hard for anyone? What does the queen need to do?”

Talia sighed and shoved a hand through her hair, her hand ticking to the side more than once. “The fact that you even have to ask that... the truth is, every queen is different. The queen is a leader of our people, but her role depends on her person. For example, Sung’s mother was an extremely skilled hunter. She provided food and taught the young; she understood the wilds and could advise the men when they were tracking or planning battle. And she was... very loveable.”

“Okay,” Joyce swallowed hard.

Anima

“Sung’s grandmother was a wise woman. She mixed medicines, advised, settled disputes and helped the council in times of crisis. She led the women’s council... she did many things, she was a great leader.”

Joyce wanted to swear. “Well, I am neither of those things,” she muttered.

“What are you good at?”

Joyce was unsure how to answer that; she had always gotten good grades, learned quickly, and made friends easily, even if they were not close friends. But how could that help with being a queen? Leading people?

“What did you do in the human world?” Talia asked desperately. “There must have been some way you showed skill or usefulness to others?”

Joyce shrugged. “My world was different. I was still considered young there. Still learning and growing, I was studying. My only jobs were working in restaurants and helping the teachers at my school.”

“What did you study?”

Joyce snorted. “Literature, but I love animals. I wanted to use stories about animals to teach children how important we are to each other... I wanted to be an example.”

They looked at each other, and then both laughed.

“Well,” Talia said after a moment. “Maybe you are in the right place after all.”

Joyce smiled, but it faded as she looked around. “Are there even animals in this place?” she asked.

Talia choked for a moment. Joyce was not sure if she was covering a laugh or something else. “Yes,” Talia said slowly. “We have animals.”

“Ones that are not human, though?”

“Yes.”

Joyce shrugged. “Maybe I can help with those?”

Talia stared at her a moment, then looked away. “Maybe,” she said, seeming uncomfortable with the idea.

They walked on in silence.

Laurie Bowler

“What does it mean to be a woman here? Not even a queen, just... a woman? An adult?” Joyce blurted out.

Talia turned her sharp-featured face and looked around them. They were in the middle of an intersection of paths. There was a thick tree to their right with some kind of stall underneath it, and some people gathered, looking at the shopkeeper’s things for sale. One of them, a thick-figured woman, looked at Joyce with suspicion. She leaned into her companion’s ear to whisper something. The man turned and looked at Joyce and frowned. Talia took her arm and pulled her away down the path opposite the people. Joyce opened her mouth to ask, but Talia shushed her.

“Just wait. We will get to the cave and then... just wait, please.”

It was a surprisingly short walk to Sung’s cave. The guards Joyce had forgotten about since they took her to the market this morning suddenly stepped out of the forest around them when they reached the clearing, and Joyce was startled.

Talia raised her eyebrows. “You did not know they were with us?”

“No! How would I? They were not walking with us.”

Talia shook her head and muttered something about weak humans, then flapped a hand at the cave's opening. “Let’s go inside,” she said, her tone dark.

The men spread out behind them, each with his back to the cave. But one of them glanced at Joyce, his face sad. She was surprised at how much it hurt. Joyce was swallowing back tears when they reached the cave's great room. Talia immediately sat on the bench in front of the fireplace, but Joyce stayed on her feet, pacing in front of her.

“I can’t help it! I didn’t learn these things; I do not... smell things like you people do. I am not strong like you, but it is not my fault! None of those things was needed to be successful in my world. So why is everyone judging me for something I have no control over?”

“Because you were a sacrifice. You were supposed to die,” Talia said quietly, her green eyes following Joyce’s movement. “You have been made a leader among people who see no reason to follow you.”

“What was Sung thinking?”

Talia made a little chirping, coughing noise. “I suspect he was not thinking much as... feeling.”

Anima

Joyce gave her a flat look. "I am hardly a beauty," she snapped. "If he was feeling anything, it was not about me."

Talia's eyebrows popped up again, and she ruffled her cloak as she had in the clearing the night before. "You truly believe that?" she said carefully.

Joyce stopped pacing. "He had never seen me before. I was a wreck, and I was terrified. Among people who are brutal and strong. It was hardly the best first impression".

Talia's face went very still at Joyce's words. "You truly have no history with Sung?" she asked quietly.

"No. How would I? I have never been to Anima."

"But our King has been to your world. More than once."

"Yes, he told me," then she remembered her question this morning and that strange feeling she had had when she looked at him. Joyce frowned. "I did ask him if we had met before. He... didn't get a chance to answer."

Talia just stared at her for a moment. "Perhaps that is a line of questioning it would be worth pursuing with him?"

"Can I even do that? He is the King. Is there not some weird tradition about bowing, not talking, or something? Am I not just going to end up offending him or everyone else...?"

"Self-pity is not admired in a woman among the Anima," Talia said softly.

Joyce folded her arms. "Oh really?" she asked sarcastically.

"Really. You asked what it means to be a woman here. An adult. Well, that is part of it. A woman of the Anima knows her strengths and plays to them; she chooses to pursue what she is good at and is humble about her weaknesses. She does not deny them. She accepts the things she cannot change and does not give up on working to change the things she believes she can."

"Well, wonderful, how do you learn to do all this because I was never taught!"

Talia grimaced. "The Anima learns by observation and imitation. We train, of course, but the greatest life lessons are learned by watching others you admire. Mimicking them, strengthening your body, and learning to believe in yourself by trying things you think you cannot do. Do not cower before a challenge, but do not seek a fight where none is necessary," she paused, her lips thinned. "And trust your husband."

Laurie Bowler

Joyce frowned. "What makes you think I do not?"

"It is obvious to everyone that you did not mate last night. There is no greater show of trust than to give your body to a male."

Joyce's mouth dropped open. "How did you... how do any of you know that?"

"When Anima mate for life, their scents entwine. Everyone knows they belong to each other. When Sung appeared this morning, it was obvious... he did not smell of you."

"He did not... you all... is nothing private in this world?" Joyce's voice was too high, but Talia did not care.

"Very little, honestly. But that also means it is difficult for people to lie or deceive us. So, it has its good sides."

Joyce shuddered. "You people are... I am not used to that kind of..."

"Get used to it. That is what Anima do. You want to be a woman here; you will learn to accept."

"What I cannot change, yes, I heard you and Sung the first time."

Talia folded her arms. "You heard. Yet, holding a grudge or self-protect is easier and more childish. The Anima thrives because we have learned the value of living for each other. Rather than ourselves. And..."

Joyce waited, but Talia trailed off. "And what?" Joyce asked impatiently.

Talia gave her a flat look. "And we live for the good of our mate's heart, and he hers. They are united and generally joyful in it. They are... paired. Everyone knows that to cross one is to fight both."

"Sung spoke about last night," Joyce said faintly. "I thought we... I thought that is what we were."

"And yet, you denied him," Talia said.

"No, I did not!" Joyce protested, though she blushed hard. "He... he did not seem to want..."

"He turned you down?" Talia gasped. It was the most expression Joyce had seen on her face, and her stomach sank. This must be even worse than she had thought.

She nodded sadly. "He was kind and gentle, but... he did not want me."

Anima

Talia was on her feet and pacing, her brow lined with confusion. Her steps were quick, and she seemed to flutter as she walked. "Couldn't be... why would he? He knew how it would impact the people... it must have-" she broke off and turned to face Joyce. "Were you overcome by the smoke last night? He carried you away from the fires. Did you struggle to think?"

"At first, but it passed. I was just exhausted. But not so tired that I could not... I mean... I would have... I gave him all the signals...."

Talia nodded, but her face remained worried. "He was likely just being a stupid man and decided he needed to protect you. He has always been overly cautious with females. I admire his intent, but frankly, he underestimates us at times. Tonight... tonight, you must make the proposition again. You are clear-headed and healthy. He will not turn you down again."

"But... what if he does. I am afraid he sees me as a child. The way he was last night..."

Talia pushed her shoulders back and shook her head. "You must not accept it. A woman would not. A woman would force him to explain himself."

"I can't do that!" Joyce gasped. "He has already turned me down. I will not force him to tell me why he does not find me attractive."

"Doesn't," Talia spluttered. "There might be true problems here, Joyce, but attraction is not one of them. We were all there last night. We could smell him across the flames, for the creator's sake. I promise you that lack of attraction was not the issue of whatever happened last night. There must have been a reason he thought you..." A knock came at the door, and Talia broke off. "Tell no one of this!" she whispered as she walked towards the door while Joyce stayed in front of the fire. "It will only create more rumours."

Then she went to the door of Joyce's house to answer it.

Laurie Bowler

SUNG

Sung felt terrible leaving Joyce alone all day after her shock, but the wolves were working to undermine him, not just Lerrin. Erwin and the others had heard more than rumours. They had broken up a meeting of several of the younger males, and there were hints that the men had expected the wolf elders to show up. The wolves were always plotting, but Sung had never faced outright insurrection. Every time that day, he had thought he had made a plan and determined what needed to be done, new information came, or someone raised a new problem. He had gotten angrier and angrier as they passed until Erwin pulled him aside as he was eating a hasty dinner.

“I know this has been a tough day, but everyone can smell your tension, and they are all getting tenser themselves in response. You need to breathe.”

“I am facing a possible attempt to overthrow my throne, and your advice is to chill?” Sung muttered.

“No, my advice is to do what you are good at and cover up your stress. You are not usually so transparent. Is the mating bond the problem?” Trust Erwin to just throw it out there. All the other men had ignored the issues since he had chewed Lerrin out about it. Sung ground his teeth. But Erwin was not going to let it go. “I could have one of the women talk to her.”

“Leave it alone,” he snarled, and Erwin’s eyebrows shot up.

“I know this has not been an easy couple of days, Sung, but you are.”

“I know, I know, I am sorry,” he forced himself to say, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. He had a pounding headache and a spiral in his stomach that would not uncoil. And his best friend, War Chief and Defender, was frowning at him like his mother did the first time she caught him strutting for a female. “I just... I can’t relax.”

Erwin snorted. “Because you have got pent up.”

“Do not finish that sentence.”

Erwin rolled his eyes. “I was going to say frustration. You need to speak with her, Sung. Not just for your sanity but for the kingdoms. It creates great uncertainty for everyone that she has not accepted you.”

Anima

“She has accepted me. Her customs are different. She has been taught not to trust easily, and her appearance here has given her no reason to change that,” he snarled. “The people will see. It will only take time.”

He moved to get up and leave the conversation, but Erwin stepped before him and put a hand on his shoulder. Sung looked at it and had to swallow back a growl. But Erwin ignored him. It was a measure of his courage that he did this because very few would ignore their king.

But Erwin forced Sung to look him in the eye. “Speak with her,” he said, his voice very low so no others would catch it in the room. “Give your supporters a reason to continue to defend you to their friends and family.”

“Defend me? Their king? I defend them!”

“And they know that,” Erwin said gently. “Which is why they keep telling the others to trust you, but the pressure is building, Sung. No one expected you to enter the market this morning without her scent.”

“It is none of their concern.”

“Liar!” Erwin hissed. The other men across the room went very still, scenting the tension between the two men. But his friend did not waver. His eyes remained locked with his king as he spoke the hard truth Sung knew but needed to hear. “A great many things happened last night that no one foresaw, and it has left your people feeling that perhaps they do not know their king as well as they thought they did. Show them that you are whom they know you to be.”

Sung held his gaze a moment, then nodded and stood. Erwin stepped back to give him room, and they clasped forearms.

“Thank you, brother.”

“You know I have your back, Sung.”

“I do, and I need you to have it even more. But I will stay true to my word because I will speak with her. I will not force her. So, this may take some time.”

Erwin sighed but nodded. Then, as if the conversation had not happened, they rejoined the other men to begin discussing potential discipline for the wolves if Lucine was not kept in check.

Laurie Bowler

Unfortunately, Sung did not return to the cave until after the high moon, when Joyce was already asleep. He crept into the cave and shuddered. Her scent was everywhere, and every molecule in his body responded. She must have spent a great deal of time there today. He wondered what she had been doing.

He remembered the look on her face when he ran from the market, and guilt washed over him in a wave. She had looked so lost and more than a little suspicious. He could not blame her. Erwin was right; he was not doing a good job hiding his emotions. She had him turned upside down, and she was not even trying. But he had been taken off-guard by her question. What had made her think they had met before? He should have just told her. He was going to have to tell her. If she learned it from someone else she had never trusted. He knew that, though he could not say how. Another creator-given instinct.

He sighed, but the deep breath pulled her scent into his nose and made him ache again. It was unnatural for Anima to stifle the mating urge, especially after the ceremony. He had given himself to her body and soul. He knew enough of the human ways to know; she had no way of knowing that. But for him... for him, being apart from her, unjointed, was like losing the use of a limb. A very insistent, demanding limb burned with desire and could be inconvenient.

Sung swallowed. He had to talk to her. But how? When? He crept through the cave to the bedroom. There were no lights on, but his eyes did not need them. So, he slipped in on silent feet, undressed and walked to the sleeping platform, sitting on its edge as he watched her. She was curled like a child amongst the furs, warm and peaceful. And, if he did not miss his guess, completely naked. Sung let a low growl of desire putter in his throat. Maybe he should wake her not to talk but to...

"Sung?" her voice was thin and rough. She cleared her throat as she sat up, the furs falling away from her until she hastily pulled them back up again. Too late. He had already seen her beautiful breasts, and the beast roared to have her. He had to turn away. Her scent, warm and flushed, was bad enough. Combining that with the sight of her pink skin would cut through the last cord of his control.

"I am very sorry to have woken you," he said, his voice deeper than usual. "It has been an eventful day, and I must tell you what will happen."

Anima

She blinked and pushed her hair back off her face. "Okay," she said. "Are you okay?"

Her question humbled him. He should have been the one to ask her that first before anything else.

He sighed and buried his face in his hands. "I am so sorry, Joyce," he breathed into his palms. "I am sorry you were alone today. I have mishandled all of this. Please forgive me."

The furs rustled as she shifted, moving to the end of the sleeping platform. Then, her hand appeared on his shoulder with a waft of her scent.

"I will admit, I wish I had seen you today. But I know you have to do your job. Talia was... accommodating. What has happened? You don't need to protect me, Sung. Tell me, I am... I want to be the right woman for this. To be queen," she replied.

Creator's light, she was amazing. The wave of possessiveness and need to prove to everyone that she was his was overwhelming. Sung swallowed back a roar of claiming. He lifted his head and turned to find her right at his shoulder, peering at him, her hair falling gently around her face and below her collarbones. He wanted to lick them.

"You are the right woman; do not let any of them tell you differently," he growled, forcing his eyes away from her bare shoulders. "They are only unused to change."

Chapter Five

A hard night 2: Our History

SUNG

He took a deep breath before continuing to speak to her.

“Everything happened differently than all of us were expecting yesterday. The Anima... we scent things, we know things, we are so used to seeing events ahead of them when we are taken by surprise, it can take some time to adjust. Most of them have never met a pure human before. They do not understand the differences in our worlds. And many are also unaware of plots thickening in the wildwood today. So... give them time. Be patient; they will come around once they have a chance to see you as I do.”

She tensed but nodded. “Can you tell me, though? How do you see me? I am afraid... Yesterday was such a shock... I am afraid I let you down. I didn’t understand what was happening and-”

“Do not apologise, Joyce. We were both thrown into circumstances we had not prepared for. I should have explained better.”

Her hand left his shoulder, and she shifted to sit cross-legged, just next to him, pulling the furs up until they wrapped her to her neck, which was something of a relief. Sung turned more towards her on the platform's edge, his knee pressed against hers, and held her gaze. He realised she probably could not see him. He was probably barely more than a moving shadow in the dark to her eyes. But perhaps that helped her. She seemed much more open tonight than she had been yesterday.

“Can you explain now?” she asked quietly. Sung sighed.

She looked at him so anxious that Sung wanted to growl at his stupidity.

“Yes, of course, I will explain.” But where to start? He reached for her, then realised she could not see his hand, so he rested the back of his hand on her knee, palm up. “I always find difficult conversations easier when we touch. Would you... hold my hand?” he asked carefully.

She swallowed but pushed the hand, not holding the furs closed over her chest between the edges, and laid it on his. Sung wanted to groan. Her skin was so soft, and her hand so tiny.

Anima

Anima females were smaller than the males also. It was not that he was unused to it. He was just affected by his mate in new ways. He cleared his throat and closed his fingers to hold hers, letting his fingertips trace the underside of her wrist as he spoke. He felt her shiver, but her smell indicated she enjoyed the touch, so he did not stop.

“There were many, many forces at play yesterday, Joyce. You were caught up in a political plot. And I am sorry I did not explain, but it was so critical that I appear untouched by what the wolves were doing... the thing I need you to know, to be certain of, is that I had no idea you were the chosen pure one. When a blood rite is called, the ruler is at the mercy of the people. Each tribe chooses a sacrifice from their ranks that they believe is their best chance of victory. It is a great honour for the tribe whose sacrifice wins. They gain great standing among the other tribes. Because I had ruled for nearly a decade without finding a mate, the tribes were beginning to wrestle for that position, so they demanded a rite. To keep the peace,” he swallowed, looked at her tiny hand, and noticed how her skin was paler than his own, so to his eyes, she almost glowed. “It is one of the few calls I cannot refuse as king,” he whispered. “I wanted to. The blood rites are ancient; I believe we have evolved beyond them. They turn my stomach, frankly. But the people... the people called it as their due, and I could not refuse. So, it was up to them to identify the sacrifices, choose their own and a pure one.”

“Why do you call me a pure one? Is that the... virgin thing?” She asked, and her scent increased as the blood rushed to her cheeks. Sung wanted to stroke them.

“In part,” he said, his voice rough. “The Anima are originally descended from humans; you hold a fascination for us. Our races are... cousins, I think you would call them. We call you the pure ones because your bloodlines were never combined with anything else. Your race is pure, but the human sacrifice must be untouched, never mated. And without family ties. So, their disappearance will cause the least amount of concern.”

She shifted her weight, and he could feel her disapproval. “This idea that just because I do not have family, I won’t be missed... you do not understand human life very well,” she muttered through her teeth.

He sighed. He knew it better than she thought. But he also knew there was little point arguing. The real problem was that Anima did not value human relationships and believed them

Laurie Bowler

to be shallow and confusing. There was some truth in Sung's experience. But those living in Anima simply didn't understand that relationships developed over time and by choice. They had a unique flavour of intimacy the Anima had never experienced because their very existence was so automatically intimate and established at birth.

Sung cursed under his breath and ran his free hand through his hair. "I can't possibly explain all of it now, but I will, I promise. You need to know why you were chosen by the wolves. It is because their power had grown amongst the tribes during their reign. They were viewed as the strongest tribe. So, their elders were given a choice of human sacrifice. I had nothing to do with it. I did not know you would be there when I walked into that clearing; you must know that, Joyce."

"Okay," she said, sounding confused.

"I think... I think they were deceptive in their choice," he said.

"How?"

"They were supposed to find the strongest bloodline, the best warrior, the best candidate among the humans for our queen. But the truth is, a human sacrifice has not won the rite for twenty generations. A rite has not ended in a ruler's choice in even longer, perhaps almost fifty generations. Your kind is generally much weaker than ours and taken by surprise. The wolves... They attempted to bring someone to the rite they measured as an easy target, someone their sacrifice could defeat quickly. They did not anticipate your intelligence or your willingness to truly sacrifice. But even if the wolves had known that was coming, I do not think they believed I would choose you. We, Anima, are arrogant regarding our bloodlines and the weakness of the human warriors. They believed you would die quickly and without a fight. And even if you did not, they believed I would have killed you rather than mate you."

"Wait, what?" she gasped.

Sung swallowed. "Last night, when you and Lucine were final combatants, one of you had to kill the other by the terms of the rite. If you both refused or could not fight, I should have killed one of you myself and mated the other. But with Lucine defeated but not dead... you shamed her, Joyce. I know you did not mean to. I understand your heart in it, and I applaud you for it. But our people do not understand. To them, death at the hands of an enemy is an honourable way

Anima

to die. In our culture, if you meet an enemy in battle, the only time you would refuse to kill would be if they were incapable. There is no honour in killing a child or someone mentally touched. To refuse to kill in our culture is to say that something wrong with her made her an unequal opponent. The Anima know that was not true, so it was an offence to the wolf tribe.”

Joyce looked at him in horror, and her mouth dropped open. “I did not know!”

He squeezed her hand. “I know that, and most tribes know it too, even if they disagree. But this is where the responsibility is mine. I had a choice when Lucine was knocked out. It was my choice, you see. My choice was to either kill you and declare her the queen. Declaring her the queen would remove any doubt amongst the people of her strength and capability or to mate you, leaving her alive but shamed. And... I chose you.”

Joyce blinked. “That is why wolves keep following me, and... that is why they are so angry.”

“They are following you?” Sung snapped.

She nodded. “Everywhere I had gone today, I would turn around and find some guy watching me like they were guarding or following me. Talia said they were from the wolf tribe. She said they were angry about Lucine and watching me for mistakes. But I did not realise....”

“The same male every time or different ones?”

“A lot of different ones,” she said. “I did not realise they were connected until Talia told me.”

“Those vicious, evil bastards,” Sung cursed, raking a hand through his hair again. “It is treason to threaten the queen!”

His hand tightened on hers.

“They did not threaten me. They were just... watching me, glaring.”

Sung snorted without humour. “And the tribes allowed it. This is worse than I thought,” he muttered.

“What? What is wrong?”

Sung blinked and realised he was frightening her. He squeezed her hand gently, and her fingers tightened on his. “Do not worry. I will handle it.”

“But what is wrong?”

Laurie Bowler

"I knew the tribes were unhappy that our mating was still uncertain, but I never imagined they would allow a threat against you."

"What threat? They did not say anything. They were just watching me."

Sung sighed. "Wolves are predators. Pack hunters. They stalk their prey in groups. Confuse them, turn them around and wait until they can separate themselves from the den or herd. Then they attack," Sung growled. "If they watched you all day today, it means they made an unequivocal declaration to the rest of the tribes of their intentions towards you, and nobody stopped them," he shuddered with rage. Joyce swallowed audibly, and he remembered himself again. "Don't worry, Joyce, I will protect you; we shut down all their attempts to undermine me today. I just had not realised they were attacking you directly. Tomorrow... tomorrow I will take care of it. Do not worry. I will allow no harm to come to you."

Joyce stared at him in the dark, her breath picking up. At first, he thought she was afraid, but then something else twined into her scent, and he snapped his head to look at her and measure her desire.

She swallowed again, then said quietly. "That woman was right."

"Which one?" his voice was hoarse.

"The one who kept holding onto you last night."

Sung let himself chuckle. "That was Judhay. She is a dear friend. Her aggression last night was all show."

Joyce shook her head. "No, it was not. She might not have wanted you for herself, but some things between women are no different here or at home. I noticed it last night. She was protective of you. She wants what is best for you. She wants you to be happy. She was afraid I would not give you that," Joyce said. She sounded uncertain not of the truth of her words but of what they meant for her.

"Then she was wrong," Sung said simply. He lifted his free hand to comb Joyce's hair back from her face so it hung behind her shoulder.

"No, she was not. At least... she said you are a good man. What if I did not appreciate that? Other women here would. She was right."

Sung's breath came faster, uncertain of her meaning. "Right about what?"

Anima

“She was right that you are good,” Joyce breathed. “And I cannot explain it, Sung. I do not know how it happened... but I do not want to lose you to one of them.”

He had leaned in without thinking, her scent drawing him. He cupped her face and stared into her eyes. “You won’t,” he said softly.

Her breath caught, and she leaned closer until their noses almost brushed. He thought she would kiss him momentarily, and his entire being lit up. She licked her lips and swallowed, and he silently pleaded with her to cross that final inch between them, yearning for her to do it. The choice had to be hers!

But instead, she searched his eyes. “How can you be sure? I have done nothing to earn this loyalty from you; you saved me yesterday. Made me queen instead of killing me! And upset an entire tribe to do it, I don’t understand, Sung. Why?”

“Because I want you,” he admitted. “I want you the way I have never wanted anyone, Anima or human.”

He brushed her cheek with his thumb and sighed, his breath washing over her. She inhaled, and his spear of desire was reflected in her eyes. She leaned in closer and started to close her eyes. But Sung, cursing himself for a fool, stopped her.

“And because I will always be grateful to you, Joyce.”

She hesitated, blinking. “For what?”

Sung steeled himself. He had to tell her. She had to come to him knowing the whole truth. He knew that. He prayed to the creator that she would believe in him and started talking.

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

“Sung?” She said, her voice too high. “Grateful for what?” He sighed heavily and sat back so they had more room. Inside, she cursed he had been about to kiss her! But that feeling inside her was churning again. As if she had been here before. As if she had seen him in the dark before. “Sung, what is going on?”

He still held her hand, and his fingers trailed up and down under his wrist, lighting shivers and goosebumps up her arm. It was unfair that he could make her tingle just by touching her lightly. So, she pulled her hand away so she could focus. Even in the dark, she could see his silhouette. His shoulders sagged.

“Joyce, there is a reason the wolves chose you.”

She nodded. “Because I am weak, they thought Lucine would beat me easily.”

“Yes, but there are many weak, virginal orphans in the human world. They looked for you because they knew it would unsettle me.”

She frowned. “Why?”

Sung ran a hand through his hair, and then his shadow lifted as he got to his feet and stepped onto the floor. Joyce did not move, but she pulled his furs closer around her, suddenly cold.

“When I was a child, there was a battle for the crown, my father’s,” he said. “I was only eight years old and had not reached physical adolescence. I was a weak point in their armour. They feared our enemies would use me against them. So... they sent me to the human world with a guardian to keep me safe. To hide me from the Anima until the mutiny was defeated. They thought it would be a few months, but it was almost two years.” He swallowed and pushed his hands through his hair, took a deep breath before turning to her and speaking again. “It was a very difficult time for me,” he said. “Anima live in family groups, especially when there are still young in the home. I was used to being surrounded by people I knew who would help and teach me. Suddenly planted in this cold, distant world with only two teachers ... the customs were very different. I was old enough to know I must not tell people what I was, not show them the differences between us. But I was not yet old enough to truly understand the differences. Or the impact my instincts would have on humans. I was... noticeably different. I frightened people,

Anima

though they did not know why.” He stood up abruptly and started to pace. He stopped walking and turned to face her. “Except one person. One girl. A neighbour. She shared my love for animals. She was two years younger than me and still interested in games. She would pretend to be an animal, and oddly... it comforted me. She did not question my instincts; she admired them. And when others became suspicious or uncomfortable... she defended me. Even to her parents.”

No, it could not be. Joyce’s mouth dropped open.

“Gareth?” she said in a strangled voice.

He nodded. “A few weeks before I left the human world, I was ten; by this time, and she was eight, there was an... incident. We were playing in the forest behind our homes. Just the two of us, as usual, because the other children did not like to be around me. I frightened them. But that day, we were not alone in the forest. But she did not know that. She did not think I always scented other living things when we played. Usually just wildlife or the occasional dog. But that day, I smelled humans, males. Older than us, though still adolescents themselves. They watched her, and I could hear their whispers. I knew what they wanted to do, though I was still too young to understand why. I could smell the predator in them and the desire. I heard how they planned to split us up. So, I grabbed her arm and pulled her out despite her protests. She did not understand, and I was too immature to explain; in Anima, when someone warns you, you know their instincts and follow. Assume they have scented something you have not. But she fought me, which made me angry because I was trying to save her from the youths. But I was about to hit my own maturity season. I was far stronger than her. So ignored her fighting hand-pulling and just dragged her out. By the time we got to the backyard of my home, she was crying. I had taken her there because I knew my guardians would help. Would go find the youths and make sure they did not harm anyone. But she was upset; she started screaming at me, calling me names, and accusing me of hurting her. And she was holding the wrist I had used to pull her out. I had not realised. I had been so afraid of her and frustrated that she fought me... I had almost... I had left cuts on her wrists with my nails,” he swallowed.

Joyce’s head spun. This was a side of the story she had never known.

“I have always been an alpha, even back then. I was often aggressive and commanding. I had been raised to rule. But humans do not appreciate that in a child. She was used to me

Laurie Bowler

ordering her around, but I was usually gentle. I would never hurt her. She had always been able to tell that to people when they voiced their suspicions of me. She was proud of me. Of my strength and the fact that I had never used it against her.”

He turned then, and his eyes seemed to glow in the darkness as they met hers. The intensity in his gaze stole Joyce’s breath.

“She ran home crying, and her parents came to my guardians that evening. They... set boundaries. We were never to be alone again. She would never be at our house, and I would only be allowed at hers when the parents were there to supervise. The cuts on her wrist were not deep, but they bled. She stood, red-eyed, next to them, her little wrist wrapped in a white bandage that made my nose wrinkle because of its very sharp smell.”

“The iodine,” she breathed.

He nodded. “But her parents thought I was making faces, that I disrespected them. I had been entirely unaware of how I looked. I had only been trying to scent if she was okay. I tried to explain to them, but my guardians understood better than I did. They knew humans would never believe I had known the plans of people we never even saw, interrupted me and made apologies. To say that angered me is... an understatement. I was confused by the entire episode. I had been working to help her, to protect her. Why was everyone acting like I had done something wrong? Like I had hurt her, I cared about her, and I knew she cared about me. She was the only person I could confidently say about in the human world. To see her crying and accusing me... to see her unable to meet my eyes... it frightened me. I did not want to lose her, but I was also arrogant and angry. I knew I had done the right thing. I could not understand why no one else saw that,” he swallowed hard. “It blew over, mostly. But the rules remained. We were never alone. So, I could never explain. I missed her a great deal. Before, we had played together every day when she returned home from school. But often now, her parents say no or only allow us to play for an hour and never outside. I struggled to stay always between the cramped, unnatural walls of human houses. So... sometimes, I did not go to her anymore. Sometimes, I went into the forest on my own,” he paused and took a deep breath. “But I always wished she was there.”

Their eyes met again, and Joyce swallowed, her breath catching. “You never told me.”

Anima

"I did not know how," he said simply. "I still had not understood the differences between humans and Anima. I still thought you were stubborn, refusing to believe I had tried to help you. It hurt me that you would believe I wanted to hurt you. My pride was wounded... " he looked away, down at his hands. "Then there was the night your parents fought. About me."

"I tried," she gasped. "I tried to tell them I knew you would not hurt me again, and I missed you."

He nodded, but his eyes, still alight with that odd glow, only flicked up to meet hers, and then he dropped them again. "I did not understand them. I had never heard your family shout like that before. I thought you were in danger...." She brought her hands to her mouth, seeing that night so differently. "When I went to your window that night, it was to make sure you were okay. That they were not harming you. I could hear you crying, and I was worried."

"I knew you just wanted to talk. But when my father found you at my window--"

"He called me a pervert. I did not know what that meant for years. When I found out, it made me sick."

"I always knew he was wrong about that, Gareth. I did."

He nodded, his eyes glowing even brighter. Joyce could not believe it was him. Could not believe he would come back at her. She had always wondered what happened to him, always wished she could see him as an adult. She had known he would be strong. Knew he was not what her father had accused him of. But she had also wondered... he was very different to the other children. Sometimes... sometimes she had wondered what was wrong with him. The thought made her sick to her stomach. She was about to throw herself off the bed and jump into his arms to plead with him to forgive her for questioning when she blinked. Because... he had broken his promise. It had been hard for him; she could see that now. And it was forgivable, she supposed. But...

"You never even left me a note," she said, the anguish of her eight-year-old self in her voice. "You just disappeared. I thought you were angry and--"

"No, Joyce, no," he shushed her, stalking back to where she sat and kneeling in front of her again and now, she knew.

Laurie Bowler

Now she could see. This was what he had always done back then, too. He had always been so much bigger than her. Whenever they worked on something together, he brought himself down to her height and made himself smaller. It was what had tipped her memory the day before. She realised why she had been so sure she could trust him. Something in her had known, even though she had not recognised him. He was so much bigger now, handsome, and... so vital. When she looked at him now, it was almost impossible to reconcile this beast of a man with that child. And yet, it made complete sense, too.

He put a hand on her knee and stared up at her. "The timing was unfortunate," he said quietly, his eyes pleading. "Right after your father found me at your window that night, my parents called for us to return to Anima. We had known it would happen soon. It is why I was so determined to spend time with you while I could. I was a child being groomed to be king. I did not know... I thought my father ruled all worlds. I'd written to him and asked him to order your parents to allow you to return to Anima with us."

She gasped and clapped her hands to her mouth, half in delight and half sad for the child who had been so naïve. "I didn't even know about this place."

"I wanted to tell you. I had even practised writing down everything I wanted to say. Then there was the fight with your father, and then my father said safety had returned. They decided to get me out of there without warning so I would not risk sharing our secrets with you. I... was furious." A shiver rocked through him, and his fingers tightened on her knee. "I knew, I think, even back then," he said, his eyes on where his hand touched her. "I was too young to understand what it meant and would become. But something in me knew that you were the one for me," he breathed, awed. Then he looked up at her, a question in his eyes.

Joyce's eyes widened, emotions chasing themselves through her so she could barely keep them safe. She had felt the same if she was honest. She had never met anyone who made her feel more comfortable or safe than her little friend Gareth. She had been so angry when he left, and she felt betrayed. And that coloured her memories. She had told herself he was a strange boy and was lucky he had disappeared. Her father continuously questioned her judgement and reminded her of those events; it was his way of proving she was too trusting. And his insistence

Anima

had made her question everything around her. Too innocent to know what the world might do to her.

But then again... then again...

“You should have told me. You should have told me this last night, Gareth! Hell, you should have told me before they even put me in that clearing!”

Sung stared into her eyes. “I did not know, Joyce. I swear. I had no idea you would be there last night until I walked and saw you... scented you...” he said. She blinked. He had to be lying, surely? But he held her gaze unwavering, his fingers warm on her thigh. “Please, Joyce,” he whispered.

She almost gave in to it, leaned in to take his beautiful face, and then remembered. “But...I asked you outright at breakfast! I asked you if we had met before because I kept getting this feeling... like *déjà vu*. Like I had been with you before, I asked you, Gareth!”

He dropped his head to her knee, and she pushed him off, scrambling up from the bed, carefully keeping the furs wrapped tightly around herself.

Sung sighed. “Joyce, I could not tell you any of this in the middle of the market with everyone around; they would have heard. None of them knew-”

“If they didn’t know, you must have brought me here!”

“No,” he was on his feet, following her as she darted around the floor, trying to find some focus for this buzzing anger that threatened to choke her. “No, Joyce, please listen to me. I knew how scared you were that night; you needed to focus. And I knew you would think I would bring you here and just throw you into this battle. I would never do that to you. If I’d had any clue they were coming for you, I would have found a way to stop it. I did not think anyone knew about you except my parents and guardians. It never even crossed my mind-”

“And yet, there I was! About to die. And you just... stood there!”

He stopped mid-step, his shoulder heaving with his breath. “You do not understand the rite-”

“I could have died!”

“But you did not!”

“Would you have stopped it?”

Laurie Bowler

Chapter Six

Our history 2: Kissing the king

He did not answer, which was answer enough. Joyce scoffed and turned away from him, pacing the floor next to the bed.

“I can’t believe you just stood there while I – people were dying, Gareth. Killing each other! They would have killed me!”

He dropped his face into his hands. “I know. I was taken so off-guard. But you have to know, Joyce, if I had stepped in, they would have killed you anyway. And me as well. The wolves would have taken over. I knew all that. It was not just shocking when I walked into the circle and saw you there. I grieved! I felt trapped, and... it seemed inevitable. Then you survived and....”

“And then you chose me.”

“Yes!”

She shook her head. “After I got out. After I lucked out. Then you chose me.”

“No, Joyce, no, the creator made sure.”

“Bullshit. I see you, Sung; I see your power, strength, and the way people submit to you, and you want me to believe that if you had stepped in for me, they would have turned on you? I do not buy it!”

“Do not buy it? They are already turning on me, and at least we finished the rite!” he snarled. “You have no clue what I faced today because you turned me down!”

“Turned you; what are you talking about?”

“You refused me! You completed the mating ceremony, then did not accept me, and they all know it, and now they think their king is not enough! That somehow I am so weak that I can not even tempt you into my bed after you declare yourself for me!”

Joyce stepped up to him. “What are you talking about? You rejected me!”

His eyes went wide. “Are you still high from the smoke? I kissed you! I carried you out! I brought you here, and... you just sat there! You did not want me!”

Laurie Bowler

“Are you crazy, Sung? I gave you every signal I knew how to give! I touched you, looked at your mouth, and leaned on your chest; I did everything short of grabbing your ears and pulling you in myself! You treated me like a child who needed to go to bed!”

“I treated you like the woman I love who had just been through something horrific! I put my own needs aside-” he stabbed a finger at his chest as he loomed over her “-because I did not want to scare you!”

“Then do not lie and say I rejected you!”

“You did not offer yourself and said you were tired!”

“Are you blind!” she shrieked. “I did offer myself, then I told you I was tired when you didn’t make a move because I was embarrassed!” She shoved his chest with her free hand. Sung froze.

She stood before him, her eyes ablaze with the fur wrapped tightly around her, her lips pressed to thin lines, and her hands on his chest. She could not move him, which was the most frustrating feeling ever. He was so big and strong that she could not even rock him back on his heels.

Then his hand wrapped around her wrist gently, and he said her name, all anger gone from his tone. “Joyce,” he breathed.

“Don’t! Do not talk to me like I am a child. I am not a child, Gareth!”

“Oh, I know that,” he said in a deep, rich voice that made her stomach flutter. But she shoved the feeling down because she needed to be mad at him. “Listen to me, Joyce, please. Just for a moment. I think I know what happened.”

She stopped shoving at his chest, but he did not let go of his wrist. His hand was warm and made her skin tingle. She swallowed and tugged at it until he opened his fingers and let her go, and then she drew the hand back under the furs. She never took her eyes off his and saw them glowing distinctly now. She swallowed. “What?” she said through her teeth.

“I should have seen it. I am sorry. I am so sorry, Joyce; you are right. I should have found a way when I realised you were here. Just... know that no part of me ever wanted you to come to harm. And I had nothing to do with bringing you here. But the moment I saw you... I ached for you. You are a beautiful woman, and I want you the way I have never wanted anyone ever.”

Anima

She swallowed again, folded her arms under the furs, and carefully kept them closed. "I am listening," she said.

He chuckled. "It's culture shock," he said, almost laughing again.

"What?"

"I forgot... the human traditions. I remembered that choosing and coming together was different for humans. I remembered that you had reason not to trust quickly. But I forgot... I forgot about chivalry."

Joyce frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Your signals. By Anima's standards, those are... very subtle, very. I am sorry, but I did not recognise them."

She blinked. She had not thought of that. "So... what would you have recognised?" she asked carefully.

Sung laughed. "How did you put it? Grabbing my ears and pulling me in?"

"You are joking, right?"

"No, I am not. Joyce, understand; I know things are very different in the human world. But in Anima, rape is virtually unheard of. The sexes relate differently here. If Anima wishes to have another Anima, we make it very plain. But in the end, the choice is always the female's (even for a king). We, males, make intentions clear by demonstrating our prowess, strength, and ability to provide. When the females decide to accept us, they... offer themselves. Openly."

"But what do the women do if the guy rejects them?"

Sung frowned. "Why would I demonstrate my desire to mate you, then turn you down when you accepted?"

Joyce snorted. "I believe they call it the thrill of the chase? I would have thought that you predator people would be all over that," she said cynically.

But Sung shook his head. "No, Joyce, I would never trick you about my feelings or desires. Any male that would do that to you is not only selfish, but he is also imbalanced. He should be avoided. I would never do that; you understand that I could have had virtually any female in Anima if I chose?" She folded her arms tighter and gave him a flat look, so he hurried on. "By

Laurie Bowler

that, I mean, when I chose you, I chose you knowingly. I chose you because I wanted you more than anyone else ever; I mean it.”

“How could you possibly know that? We have not seen each other in what? Fifteen years? More?”

Sung gave a lopsided smile. “People grow up but do not often change,” he said softly. “I could smell you, and I could feel you. Joyce, you are only more of what you were as a child. When I saw you there, scented you, I knew the seedling had blossomed into a full tree. I gave myself willingly. I want no one else.”

“Then... then why didn’t you kiss me when we got back here?”

“Because I was waiting for you to kiss me. The choice is yours, dear one. And it always will be. I will never fear that.”

“But you were not unwanted, Sung,” she said through her teeth. “That is what I am saying. You did turn me down. I was... ready.”

A smile grew on Sung’s face, and he stepped closer. “And now?” He breathed.

Joyce blinked. “Now, what?”

“Are you still ready?”

Joyce sucked in a breath.

Anima

SUNG

He stared at her, staring up at him. Watched her throat bob. And by the creator's mane, he prayed.

She stepped closer, and one of her pale hands slid out from between the furs she had kept around her like a shield. She touched his bare chest, and they both sucked in a breath.

"Sung?" she whispered into the dark.

"Yes?" he whispered back, his hands at his sides, shaking because he was working so hard not to touch or scare her away.

"I have never been with a man before," she said, shaking slightly.

He swallowed. "I know."

"I am assuming you have – with a woman."

The huff of laughter broke out of him before he could catch it, but he stifled it quickly. "Uh, yes, I have."

She nodded, and he heard her breath catch in her throat. Her slim, white throat bared as she lifted her chin to meet his eyes, her hand still on his chest. He wondered if she knew what that meant to him. Her scent was an intoxicating mix of desire, curiosity and nerves.

"So, since you have done this before, and I have not... doesn't it make sense that you show me? Instead of me leading, I mean."

Sung's breath left his lungs in a whoosh. She showed trust, especially for a human woman who knew males could violate. It was... humbling.

"Are you certain?" he breathed. "I do not want to frighten you or... do things you do not enjoy."

Her lips pressed together but tilted up on the sides like she stifled a smile. "Well, I am guessing you have figured some stuff out over the years and... I trust you. If I do not like it, I will tell you. We can try something else."

His chest rose and fell like a bellow. He put a hand to her face, and she leaned her cheek into it. His fingers were shaking. Him! The king! She did things he had never experienced to him – and in innocence! How was it possible?

"But how will I know, Joyce?" he murmured, pleading. "How will I know what you want?"

Laurie Bowler

Her eyes locked with his in the dark – he knew his were glowing now, the animal blood in him rising to the mating call... no pun intended. “If I do not say no,” she whispered, “the answer is yes.”

A shudder rocked him. “Are you certain?”

She released a breath and stood between his massive feet so her chest almost brushed his abdomen. Her hand on his chest slid up to cup his neck, and the other came up to his collarbone as she dropped the fur. Sung groaned as the fur slid down her curves like water over the land. She tensed, aware of her nakedness in a way an Anima female would never be. But as Sung scented her fear, he also scented her demand and desire.

“I have never been more certain of anything in my life,” she said as she raised her chin defiantly and met his gaze.

“By the creator’s light, Joyce -” he groaned as he finally released the tethers he had held on himself since the moment he saw her in the circle. He closed the space between their bodies, pulling her into his chest and tilting her chin to meet his kiss in the same movement.

When their lips met, they both sucked in heavy breaths, then forced them out. With a rolling purr of approval, Sung tilted her head for a better angle and let his lips trail over hers so lightly at first, a feather touch. Then, when she did not pull away, he dove deeper, burying his hands in her hair and sliding his tongue against hers. She clung to his neck and shoulders, her breath coming quickly, kissing him back with surprising skill. He let his fingertips trail down her spine, and she rippled under his touch in a way that made him want to roar. The beast within him fought for release, and he fought it back, keeping his touch gentle and whisper-light, giving her time to find her desire and lose her fear. But he was already trembling with the desire for her. He was intoxicated by her scent, his ears listening to the tiny whimpers that escaped her throat, his touch full of her skin, and the rest of the world tunnelled until nothing else existed except her.

Slowly, he nudged her backwards, step by step, without breaking the kiss, still stroking her skin until they reached the sleeping platform. But before he could lean down to lift her, she dropped her head back and whispered his name. Her pure, white throat was bare and open to him, almost bringing him to his knees.

Anima

He'd had women, yes. And he had a wonderful time. But never once had a woman given him her throat like that. Shocked to the core, Sung stared down at her, then brought one of his hands up, using two fingers to trace the line from her jaw, down the cord of her neck, to her collarbone. A lazy growl rolled in his throat as he leaned down to taste her skin, kissing, licking, then letting his teeth scrape her clavicle. And she buried her fingers in his hair and pulled him closer. Her scent was round and full, musky with her heat, and the mating call swelled in his throat.

"Oh, fuck, Joyce," he groaned. "Are you sure? I can't... if you need to stop."

"Please do not stop," she gasped, goosebumps pebbling her skin from his touch at her throat and down her thigh. He let his hand trail down between her breasts, then to her waist, following the path of them until he cupped her behind and kissed her neck, right under her ear, and another growl pattered in his throat. Her hands were everywhere, following his shoulders, arms, and chest lines. She was panting, her shoulders rising and falling too fast as she clung, stroked, and pulled him closer.

Thanking the creator he had undressed before this conversation started, he leaned down, putting one hand behind her knees, the other at her back and lifted her effortlessly. She squeaked as he did it, but he chuckled and kissed her again. By the time he had climbed the platforms to lay her down on his furs, she was liquid in his arms. He kissed her a breath longer before he would let her go. She arched into him, her breasts pressing into his chest as she clung to him, and he breathed her name again.

He, the king, whose senses were so sharp. How had he been so blind? How had he missed it?

This... This was what he had been looking for all this time.

This was what he had ached for all these years.

She praised the creator... as he laid her down on the plush furs of his bed, it was very apparent that she wanted him back just as badly. He tried to speak but cleared his throat when nothing came out.

"Joyce, are you sure?"

Laurie Bowler

“Sung, please,” she gasped, but her hands were over her face. He laid her down and knelt between her thighs, taking a moment to look at her. She was smiling but feeling self-conscious. “Please,” she whispered, reaching for him and pulling him down. He went willingly, purring as he stroked her, covered her with his body, arched over her to kiss her again and prepare her for the joining.

This was going to hurt her, which she regretted. He had to make sure she was ready. So, he kissed her a great deal, letting his lips and tongue trace trails along her jaw, neck, and collarbones. Letting his fingers stroke her breasts, her sides, the backs of her thighs. She panted, gasped, and began to roll under him, clearly searching for something, though perhaps unaware of what it was. He slid his hand down to her softest, warmest place and began to stroke and nudge, finding the rhythm that soon made her gasp and her cries echo around them, his breath began to tear from his throat, and his kisses lost their finesse. Pulling back just far enough to get his hand between them, he took himself in hand and slid along her once, then twice, not entering her but letting her get used to the feel of him.

“Sung! Oh!” she gasped.

And then she rolled her hips to meet him. A cry that was half-groan, half-roar broke from his throat. The beast inside him snarled to be unleashed. He was terrified he had scared her, but she clung to him harder and gasped his name again. Beating back the Lion inside, he forced himself to focus.

“Joyce,” he croaked, “it is time,” he swallowed convulsively. “This will hurt; I am so sorry -”

“Don’t be,” she cried. “Oh, please, Sung, I want you. Please.”

He buried his nose in the space where her neck met her shoulder and used his hand between them to make sure he was positioned correctly.

“I love you, Joyce,” he whispered, nipping her neck. “I have loved you since I was a cub. Are you ready to belong to me?”

“Yes!”

He took a deep breath just as the door behind them burst open.

“Sung, you have to.....oh, shit!” Erwin shouted.

Anima

He whirled in a flash, putting himself on all fours, blocking the view of Joyce with his body, snarling at the intruders, jolting with the shock and the thwarted release. A roar tore out of him, and Erwin and the four men with him all dropped to one knee, faces to the floor, hands up in surrender.

Sung shuddered his body in a turmoil of conflicting desires and the urge to plunge into Joyce. The battle to protect her, the rage he felt towards these males for their abrupt and shocking entrance, and the bloodlust to bite out each of their throats for being so close to his female when she was so vulnerable.

Joyce made little noise, but she scabbled behind him to find furs to cover herself as he raged at the men.

“Get OUT!” he roared.

“I am sorry, Sung,” Erwin said, plainly wishing he could be elsewhere. “But you are needed now.”

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

When the men burst in, making all that noise, and Sung's weight and warmth disappeared, her first feeling was utter terror; she was about to be killed, torn apart by these people. But very quickly, it became clear that the men were looking for Sung, who was not taking kindly to being interrupted.

Then Joyce plunged into horror, bone-deep embarrassment. She scrambled to find furs to cover herself as Sung roared at the men. They all dropped in the face of his rage, clearly trying to keep him calm and deliver whatever message they had come to give.

Blushing to her roots, Joyce pulled one of the furs around herself, then sat up. Sung was still crouched on the bed between her and the door, a strange noise in his throat like a growl, only higher. It was menacing, and the men before him did not move.

"Sung, I am sorry. I am so sorry," Erwin said quietly, his hands up, palms facing Sung. "But... you need to calm down. Come back; we would not hurt her. I promise." Sung shuddered and kept making that eerie noise. The muscles on his back jumped and twitched in odd ways, and she wondered exactly what was happening in his mind as he continued to make that noise but not speak. Then he snorted, and Erwin was startled but did not move or make eye contact with Sung. "We would not hurt her, Sung. We would not even look at her. Come back, brother; she is safe."

Come back? Come back from where? Had he gone into some kind of trance or something from the shock?

"Sung?" she said quietly and reached for his back.

"No!" Erwin hissed through his teeth.

But Sung just quivered where she touched him, then relaxed. Very slowly, he turned away from the men before him to look at her over his shoulder.

Joyce's eyes widened, and she gasped. His eyes were completely yellow, and the pupils were black pinpoints in the sea of gold, near-white at the centre but a beautiful rich gold at the edges. And yet... there was no white in them at all.

"Sung... what...?" Then he blinked, and his normal, warm eyes stared back at her and her wide-open mouth. "Sung?" she breathed.

Anima

"I am sorry if I scared you. Are you okay?" he rasped, his voice husky and dry as if he had been shouting for hours.

"I-I am fine. Are you okay?"

He huffed a breath out of his nose. "I will be," he said dryly. "After I kill my men for walking in here like that."

Erwin and the others, still looking wary, got to their feet with their shoulders slumped as Sung turned back to them, apparently unconcerned about crouching naked in front of them.

"What are you doing here?" he snarled at his friend. "Unannounced."

"I am sorry, Sung, but the patrols scouted a lone male a week ago and have been tracking him. He crossed into the wildwood yesterday and has picked up the scent of the females. He has been on a direct line for the city since lunchtime."

"Couldn't they deal with him?" Sung said through his teeth.

But Erwin shook his head. "He is huge, the biggest we have seen and after last time..."

"Yes, yes," Sung grumbled, shifting to sit on the platform's edge, with one hand remaining back, clasped gently on Joyce's ankle. He stroked the thin skin with his thumb, and Joyce had to hide a shiver. Everyone was silent momentarily, and she realised the men were waiting for Sung to decide. "Very well," he snarled, though he was in a foul mood. "Wait outside. I will be out in a few minutes."

"Sire," Erwin said, bowing. It was the first time Joyce had seen him so formal with Sung.

What had she missed? What was going on? The men all backed out of the room and disappeared down the hall. Sung sighed a massive lungful of air, and his shoulders sagged. His thumb kept its slow slide over her ankle. She did not move, uncertain of what was wrong with Sung.

"Are you... okay?" she asked finally.

Sung ran both hands over his face and muttered something under his breath. "Yes, I will be," he said, but his voice sounded thinner than usual. "It was just a shock, that is all." She nodded, realising he could not see her and reached forward to put her hand on his broad back. When she touched him. Sung sighed again, then crawled back onto the furs, though he did not

Laurie Bowler

press her down into them; he just sat next to her, cupping her face, his thumb sliding against her cheek. "I am so sorry we were interrupted," he growled.

"You and me both," she said and grinned, hoping to bring back some of his softness and humour. There was something about him that was... sharper than usual, darker. "Are you sure you are okay?"

He nodded and looked at the doorway where the men had disappeared. "For Anima, the movement of mating is... instinctive. Because they interrupted, it took me a moment to get myself under control. My instinct was to protect my mate," he said with a wry smile. "I probably just shaved five years off Erwin's life. He could see how close I was to attack."

"You would not attack him, surely?" she said, touching his chest. He shivered, eyes closed for a moment, then took her hands.

"That feels wonderful," he croaked. "But I have to go... think. And be useful to people. That is hard to do when I am a walking erection," he grinned and kissed her fingers.

Joyce smiled back. "How long will you be gone? Should I wait up?"

Sung's smile became a grimace, and he bared his teeth. "Sadly, no. This may take a few days."

"Days?" she gasped. "But-"

"I know," he said, his eyes locked on hers. "But make no mistake, Joyce. I am going to take care of this as quickly as I can. And when I come back..." he let his eyes make a promise.

"I will be waiting," she said, letting her fingers curl into the stubble on his jaw.

He nodded. "I hope so. There is much I wish to teach you," his grin was wicked as he leaned in to kiss her, long and slow, so slowly that Joyce wondered if he had changed his mind about leaving. But as her skin began to hum again and her breath came faster, he pulled away, groaning, as if losing contact hurt him.

"Will you be gone for days?" she asked.

"I promise you, on my throbbing member, it will be as few hours as I can manage," he said. Then he sighed. "But yes... the animal we have to intercept is more than a day's travel away. It will be at least three days. Possibly longer if we struggle to locate him or if he puts up a greater fight than we anticipate."

Anima

“Why do you have to go hunt an animal? Don’t you have people to do that for you?”

He smiled a lazy smile. “Normally, yes. But this is an issue of dominance. It takes a king to bring another king to submission.”

Joyce blinked. “What kind of animal are you hunting?”

“A Lion, of course,” he said and winked.

“Sung!”

“Do not worry; we have done it before and will do it again. We leave them alone until they create a threat, but if he is alone and has scented our females, he would not leave unless a more dominant male makes sure he knows they are not his to take.”

“And... you are the more dominant male?”

“Yes, I am,” he whispered and kissed her again.

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SUNG

After more kisses and a groaning goodbye, Sung dressed, packed a travel roll and made his way out of the cave, every muscle pulling him back towards Joyce. He was still twitching from the shock of having the mating interrupted, his skin feeling too loose and tight. He wanted to growl, roar, run back to the cave, lock the door, and plunge into Joyce.

Sometimes being king sucked.

Erwin waited for him in the clearing, talking quietly with the other Leonine men he had brought for the hunt. The moon was high and almost complete, the light as bright as daylight to Sung's eyes. He quickly scanned the clearing, checking that the Equine guards remained with their backs to the cave, watching the forest around them. He hated leaving Joyce, but he hated the idea of someone coming after her while he was gone even more.

"Make sure the guards take shifts while she is here," Sung said to Erwin as he joined the men. "I don't want her unattended any moment she is alone, and I do not want sleepy men making mistakes." Erwin nodded, but Sung looked back at the cave and frowned. He had never required guards on his own home before, but the fact that he did not feel comfortable lifting it while he was gone told him how serious the situation was. "You are certain I am necessary for this?" he said, rolling his shoulders and stretching his neck. His damned skin wanted to shift, and he did not want to give up the mental space to fight it.

Erwin scowled and pulled him aside, away from the other men. Sung gave his entire focus to his second. Erwin did not pull him out of bed for anything, nor did he try to keep a conversation private for fun.

"What is it?" He asked

Erwin gave him a flat look. "I am certain you are needed for this; the young do not have the strength of character yet, but I am also certain you are about as erratic as a colt feeling his oats right now. What the hell was that, Sung?"

Sung glared at him out from under heavy brows. "You need me to explain it to you, Behr?"

"I need you to tell me why I just saw my king almost take beast form without a choice. I have not seen you do that since your first mating."

Sung snorted. "Damn, I had forgotten about that."

Anima

“I am serious, Sung. What is going on?”

“What is happening is that I was about to take my mate for the first time, and four men busted down my door while my mate was unprotected. You want to try it, Behr, and see how steady you feel?”

But Erwin was not going to give in. “I have seen you under stress and pressure for the last decade, Sung. I have never seen you fight for control like that. Your eyes shifted.”

Chapter Seven

Losing control

“It is just the mating bond wearing on me. I am sure it will pass after I enjoy my mate, and she gets to enjoy me.”

“Well, that will not happen while you are on the trail.”

“No, it is not. Your timing was impeccable, my friend,” Sung tried to joke, but he grimaced against another ripple in his back and had to tip his head.

Erwin sighed. “Maybe we delay a day and let you guys-”

“You are not about to tell me you just interrupted us for something that does not need immediate attention?” Sung snarled

Erwin stared at him. “No, I am about to tell you I think you are in a lot more trouble than you think if you do not get this under control, and I measure which risk is greater. Letting a silent one reach the females or letting my king loose to become one himself.”

Sung rolled his eyes, but he was still twitching and trying to hide it from his friend. “I can’t think of a better way to blow off steam than to go head-to-head with a big, silent one. It will be nice to smack something and not have to hold back.”

“Unless, of course, you lose control, and we lose you.”

“Erwin, please. The chances of me going that deep are so small.”

“If you had asked me a week ago, I would have said the same thing. But I saw your skin bubble when you did not want it to. Your eyes changed, Sung!”

“Yeah, I heard you the first time,” he grumbled, hiking the travel roll higher on his shoulder. “It was bad, I get it. But as I said, we can do nothing about it now. You guys killed the mood, well and truly. And besides, I do not want to rush that. It is her first time.”

Erwin stared at him for a long moment, then inhaled deeply and raised an eyebrow. “Her scent is following you,” he said. “Interesting.”

Sung shrugged as if it was a response, but he was trying to get to the itch between his shoulder blades. “I told you it would just take time. Before we go, tell me what you see in the wolves if I am gone... are we leaving the people vulnerable?”

Anima

“I do not think so,” Erwin said, scanning the forest around them. “You are off saving the world, and the people love you for it. No one has forgotten that silent one from a few years back. If the wolves try to talk you down while you are doing that, they will meet a lot of arguments, I think... as long as we keep a guard on Joyce. She is the only weak spot.”

Sung growled in his throat, and Erwin nodded. “Do not let her out of the warriors' sight.”

“It is a little tough when you do not want her to know we are following her, but we will do our best. She will not be alone and unguarded; you can be certain of that.”

Sung nodded and clapped his friend on the back. “Thank you. Okay, the sooner I take care of this guy, the sooner I will get back, and we can sort this out. Which direction is he?”

“When the scouts left, he was three days east. But he had just caught the scent, so he will travel faster now.”

Sung growled again and beckoned to the other Leonine to come closer. “We better get moving then. Thank you, Erwin, and do not worry; dominance is what I do best,” he grinned.

Erwin rolled his eyes. “That is exactly what I am afraid of.”

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

Breakfast the following day was lonely, up on the podium without Sung. Talia was kind enough to sit beside her, but she had her sister with her, and the two cackled and chirped their way through the meal. Joyce did not feel like interrupting.

When she was done eating, she got up and realised she had nowhere to go except back to the cave. She sighed. Maybe she should just walk around and see things?

When she turned to see a discreet way to get off the stage and onto the streets without walking past the whole kingdom down at the tables, she noticed Talia's sister's nostrils flare. Then she turned and looked at Joyce with a strange expression.

Do I smell? Joyce wondered. She had been careful to wash herself down in the bathing room of the bedroom each morning. But it was not like taking a shower or a bath, she supposed. She needed to find out where the Anima bathed and how they bathed.

She turned towards the stairs down to the eating area, but Talia caught her arm, a strange look on her face. "Good morning, Joyce," she said quietly. "Eventful night?"

Joyce blinked. "Uh, yes. Oh shit, did they tell people?" she hissed.

Talia shook her head. "I do not know what you are talking about. I can just smell... it is odd. It is as if Sung's scent follows you. They are not twisted together as mates usually are. But... he is on you, somehow. I had never smelled that before," she leaned in and took a deep breath near Joyce's hair. Joyce tried not to pull away. This sniffing thing was definitely odd. But she saw Anima doing it to each other all the time. She had to remember that it was normal for them. When Talia pulled back, she was shaking her head. "Very curious," she said. "What must have happened? It is as if the mating bond began to take, but then... did not?"

Joyce blushed and looked around. There were too many people nearby, people with very sharp ears. "Is there somewhere we can go for a walk where we would not be overhead?" she asked Talia.

The woman shrugged. "Sure, I will show you the bathing hole if you like?"

"Perfect! Kill two birds with one stone."

Talia pulled her head away. "What was that?"

Anima

Joyce clapped her hand over her mouth. "I am so sorry. It is just... it is a saying. It just means getting two things done through only one action. I promise. It is not... it is not about killing anything."

Talia frowned. "And you humans say we are brutal," she muttered, then shook herself as if to shake off the thought. "Come, I will show you, and you can tell me your story on the way."

Joyce sighed and followed.

Twenty minutes later, Joyce blushed to her roots, and Talia walked alongside her, cackling with laughter. "Creator's light, I wish I had been there to see his face!" she tittered. "King Blue-balls!"

"Sssshh!" Joyce hushed her, looking around. "He was really... aggravated."

"I am sure he was!"

"I am serious, Talia; something happened. For a minute, it was like he wasn't there, and Erwin said something to him about coming back, and when he turned to look at me, his eyes... his eyes were different".

Talia stopped laughing immediately. "Different, how?"

"They were gold. All gold, like there were no whites in them. And the pupils were tiny. What was that? I didn't have a chance to ask him before he left," Joyce swallowed and made herself speak the words she was embarrassed to even have thought. "Are you people... magic?" she said in a hushed whisper.

But Talia just laughed again. "Oh dear, no. That was just the beast within making an appearance. Probably because of the shock and mating, the men get so possessive, especially the Alphas. I am surprised he did not tear Erwin's throat out, to be honest. Erwin's dominant in his clan... it must have been a close call."

"Is that why they all knelt?" Joyce asked. "They all went down on one knee and wouldn't look him in the eye, and they held up their hands like they were surrendering."

Talia went very quiet and nodded. "Yes, that is exactly why. Oh dear, it must have been quite serious. Sung does not usually require that of the other males."

"I do not think he even thought about it; they just did it when he whipped around. He was making this noise... it was kind of creepy. But they all just dropped, and Erwin talked him down."

Laurie Bowler

“What did you do?”

Joyce shrugged. “I touched his back and asked him if he was okay; that is when I saw his eyes. But he just... came back, then he was fine.”

Talia looked at her like she was not certain Joyce was right, but she shrugged, too. “Well, it sounds like they handled it well. Poor sung.”

“Poor me!” Joyce grumbled. “I was about to find out what all the fuss was about.”

Talia’s laugh startled a flock of sparrows out of a nearby tree. “Oh Joyce, you are a hoot,” she said a minute later, wiping tears of laughter from her cheeks. “You would not be missing out for long, I am sure. That poor man will probably slit the silent one’s throat rather than just scare him off, so he can get back sooner,” then she was off in cawing laughter again.

Joyce snorted, but then she was thoughtful. “Why do you call them silent ones? Sung said it was a lion?”

Talia had to take deep breaths to stop laughing, but she managed. “Yes, the animals, our ancestors, at least we think they are... dumb. They can not speak; they do not reason. They have the instincts we inherited but nothing more. It is sad for us. We would like to understand them better, but they can’t seem to cross the barrier; we understand their bodies and follow many of their customs and instincts. But in the end, they are just... animals. Silent ones. We respect them, but we do not allow them to dominate. They scent their kind on us, and it can cause problems. That’s what Sung’s trying to fix. A few years ago, a lone male made it to the city. We lost two equine children and a wise woman before the entire pride brought it down. We have had trackers patrolling wildwood ever since.”

“It is so sad that they must kill them,” Joyce said.

Talia shook her head. “No, that is why they patrol. They are trying to send them away before they have to be killed for the safety of Anima. They called Sung for this one because it must be powerful. It will take our strongest male to lay claim to the females and scare him away.”

Joyce could not help a flush of pride, and Talia did not miss it. She smiled and nodded. “Yes, Joyce, you caught a good one. One of the best. Appreciate him; he is... very desirable. To the predators,” she said hastily.

Joyce laughed. But it was a comment she continued to think about for days.

Anima

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SUNG

It was extraordinary how it took them almost two days to locate the silent one. It had caught the scent of the females in wildwood city. The scouts had followed it directly towards them for a day while they called Sung. But before he arrived, the silent one had started to circle and was spiralling his way through the wildwood; he wasn't going in any particular direction, so Sung almost missed the scouts that had stayed behind to follow it. By the time he sighted the animal, his skin was itching to shift, and the smell of a dominant male hit so hard that he was forced to stop for a few seconds to bring himself under control.

One of the adolescents, Leonine, along for the trip to learn how these things were done, lost control, and the other men's attention was distracted, helping him return to himself. Sung heaved a sigh of relief that none noticed his battle. They would have known that was not normal for him. When everyone was back in their natural forms, and the men had turned back to him, expecting that he would begin to move, he shook his head.

"Just a moment," he said bluntly. Sung closed his eyes and inhaled deeply like he was pulling the animal's scent when he was genuinely working on disciplining his body. He frowned. Why was the urge to shift so strong? He hadn't had to fight it like this since his teens. But with the controlling breath had come a new scent on the breeze, or rather, he had sensed a quality to the silent one's scent he had not picked up before. "Do you smell that?" he asked the scout leader.

The man sucked in through his nose with his eyes closed and frowned. "What is it?"

"I do not know," Sung turned to face the animal's direction less than a mile away if his nose was right. "But I think we better find out."

A few minutes later, they crept along a rise above a clearing where a freshwater creek hugged the eastern side. The animal's scent was strong here, and as they reached the edge of the rise, Sung put his hand up to signal the others to stop walking and wait for his further command. Alone, he padded to the edge and peered over, his eyes widening.

The creature below was massive. It was nearly as large as he in his transformed state, its jaws alone big enough to crush a man's head. It was no wonder the scouts had called him in to deal with it, and he thanked the creator that they had. But it was not the size that gave Sung

Anima

pause. There was a scent on the animal, something unnatural, something sharp. The male lay in the shade of the rocks below, asleep because it was daytime. Their animal ancestors preferred to move and hunt at night.

Sung had been careful to approach downwind so he would not disturb it. He would allow it to catch his scent when the time was right. In some cases, that alone was enough to move a silent one along. But Sung doubted that would be the case this time. He cursed under his breath. The lion below was not just huge; it had that smell of something off, and its scent was heavy with its dominance. How a male that strongly came to be alone, Sung could not understand. To have reached the size and certainty and not have already gathered himself a considerable pride was utterly illogical. And yet, here he was.

Muttering under his breath and rolling his shoulders to push back the urge to shift and show this monster who was boss. Sung slunk back down the rise and rejoined his men below. Using hand signals for them to follow, he ran them half a mile away, still downwind, to discuss the strategy.

This one was going to need a meticulous approach.

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

She knew it was too early; Sung had said he'd likely be gone for at least three days. But her stomach flipped when she saw Erwin at the market the second day. She had thought the defender had gone with Sung. Who was protecting him if Erwin was not?

Joyce had noticed the guards at the cave, along the path, and at different points during the day; she had caught sight of men with the same leather armbands as Erwin watching her. Especially when Lucine was nearby, scowling at her, she had noticed. But she had not seen Erwin himself. She had assumed he had gone with Sung. If he was here and Sung was not...

She saw him at the market tables, his back to her, speaking to people at one of the tables near the back, but by the time she got down to the floor, he was gone. When she followed the nearest trail through the forest to one of the city's commerce rows. She saw stalls and boxes lined up under and around and occasionally inside the massive tree trunks; she caught sight of him again, speaking with one of the merchants. Swallowing her insecurity, she walked firmly up to him, intending to ask him why he was not with Sung and what he knew about their King's return.

He spoke quietly to the woman who was showing him lengths of leather when Joyce touched his shoulder and said, "Erwin, I am sorry to interrupt, but-"

The man shoved a breath and whirled on her, drawing his sword at the exact moment he froze, eyes wide, when he saw her. Joyce froze, too. Looked at him in shock.

"Joyce!" he ground out.

"I am sorry; I didn't mean to startle you-"

"Then do not touch me without warning, not if you wish to keep your hand!" he barked, shoving his sword back into its sheath and turning his back on her.

"But... I just wanted to ask you...." Then she caught the look of fierce disapproval the merchant was giving her, and she caught the whispers of two others nearby, who glared at her when she turned.

She didn't understand; what had she done? She stood lamely, uncertain whether to apologise again or leave Erwin alone, when someone cleared their throat behind her. She turned and found another merchant stall just a few feet away, with a young man standing behind it. He

Anima

was very tall like Erwin and had the same barrel chest yet slim limbs. When Joyce looked at him, he tipped his head for her to approach him. She looked at Erwin again, but he was intentionally ignoring her. Had he only been kind to her before because she was with Sung? Was this what it would be like whenever her husband was not nearby?

The young man made another pssst sound, and she turned back to him, approaching slowly, and then he nodded. She stepped up to his stall and waited while he unfolded a pretty, braided necklace in front of her as if he was showing it off for her to purchase. His words were shallow, almost a whisper and spoken through a tense jaw.

“He’s equine. We are, in our hearts, prey animals. Touching one of us without warning is a good way to get your head kicked off,” he said quietly, stroking the braided leathers before him like he was pointing something out to her.

“I...I didn’t know...”

He nodded. “They are trying to show you. But you are not listening.”

“I... what?” she said, swallowing the pinch in her throat.

He lifted his eyes to meet hers; his eyes were a deep, rich brown and kind. Though his expression was firm. “They are trying to give you the signals. Show you how to behave correctly. But you are not listening. You keep apologising to people or rushing away. That is not how things work here. You are breaking all the rules all the time.”

“What rules?”

“The tribal rules. Our cultural ways. You did not learn them as a foal, so you have to learn them now. They are trying to show you all of them.”

“No, they are not. They ignore me, whisper about me, or just avoid me completely,” she said bitterly, taking the leathers he offered and pretending to look at them.

The young man chuckled. “I promise they are not ignoring you at all. They just do not know what else to do. They are trying to teach you, but you are not learning.”

“How can I learn if no one speaks to me?”

He blinked, his eyebrows up. “You learn by observing. By watching and mimicking. Did the adults in your world not show you how to behave?”

Laurie Bowler

She pursed her lips. "The adults, in my world, explain themselves when they want someone to understand something. They do not just turn their backs and... and..."

"You misunderstand what just happened," he said, nodding towards Erwin. "He finished shopping right after you startled him. But he is making excuses to be there now, to give you a chance to try again correctly."

"How am I supposed to know what is correct if he does not tell me? He just turned his back on me!"

"So, you would have another chance to try again, as you did the first time. This time, instead of touching his back, move to his side, where he can see you. Wait until he looks at you, then ask your question." She frowned, but the youth smiled. "I am serious. I am trying to help. Give it a try."

She turned back to Erwin, who seemed to be making small talk with the merchant. None of them looked at her, but there was an air of tension around them. Swallowing her pride, she put her shoulders back. She walked slowly towards Erwin, carefully approaching his side, where he could see her. Then she did as the young man suggested and waited until he had stopped speaking and glanced at her from the corner of his eye.

"I-I am sorry to interrupt you, Erwin. But I was surprised to see you here. I thought you went with Sung? Do you have any news about when he will be back?"

Erwin shook his head. "The silent one is pride work," he said gently. "I cover things here while Sung is gone to make sure there is no trouble."

Joyce looked at her hands. "Okay, well, have you heard anything?"

He shook his head again. "I likely would not unless there is a severe problem. Sung will handle it, and then they will return. I am certain he would not stay away a moment longer than necessary, Joyce," he said and winked at her.

She blushed, suddenly remembering the last time she had seen this man. Cheeks hot, she nodded. "Okay, thank you. I am sorry, again, that I startled you."

"You learned. That's all we can ask," he said kindly. The merchant nodded as well. And Joyce gave him an awkward smile, then excused herself.

Anima

Behind her, the young man was beaming. "Nicely done!" he said as she returned to his stall. "You see, you only have to watch and learn. Things will improve."

"Thank you," she said softly. "But I wouldn't have understood that if you had not explained it."

The man looked at her with a strange frown. "Things must be very different in your world," he said, shaking his head.

She sighed. "Very. I am Joyce, by the way."

The man huffed. "Yes, I know. We all know who the human queen is," he said with a wry smile. "My name is Gray."

"Well, thank you for your help, Gray. If you ever have any other tips for me, I am always open to hearing them. I am afraid I did not know people were trying to communicate with me. Now I wonder who else I have hurt or angered without knowing it."

"Oh, everyone," he said, smiling. "But they do understand that you are ignorant rather than dark-hearted. They do not know any way to teach you other than to demonstrate. And I could see that you were not quite catching on."

"Well, thank you," Joyce repeated. "Perhaps we could share a meal or something, and you could offer me more help? I'd like to feel more confident about how to treat people in ways they prefer."

He stared at her momentarily, then looked behind them, though she could not see anything back there except more trees. When he turned around, he sighed.

"Yes," he said carefully. "I think that would be a good idea."

Laurie Bowler

SUNG

Ordering the others to stay several spans behind him, Sung circled until he would be downwind of the silent one. The lion immediately began to huff, the calls resonating in his massive barrel chest and echoing off the trees. Sung did not call back, did not entertain the challenge, and just let himself feel his position, dominance, and desire for his mate.

The male would scent the certainty of his position, and although he was unlikely to walk away, the scent of the females was strong here; he would be wary and would feel Sung's power and strength before they met. Surprisingly, the male did not move toward him. The calls did not come closer or any faster than Sung's confident pace toward it. Sung frowned; any male who challenges dominance should automatically approach. Why did this one stay where he was?

The hair on the back of his neck stood up. Sung stalked toward the clearing, now making his own growls of dominance. When he finally reached the line of trees at the clearing, on the opposite side of the shade the lion had been resting in, he saw the beast pacing back and forth. It was as if some kind of wall stood between them, as if something was stopping it from coming for him. But when Sung stepped out, it stopped suddenly, standing evenly on all four paws, head down, not in submission, but its eyes piercing. Measuring its tail lashing back and forth... in anger?

Sung realised as he entered the sunlight that nothing about this creature was normal. Sung then chose to roar his challenge, letting all of the wildwoods hear their king and know he stood between them and danger! In every clash he'd had with a silent one, they followed the traditions of the animal first scenting, then calling. Then, with the roar of the challenge, they circle to measure each other. Then Sung would transform so his appearance matched his scent.

Usually, that was all that was needed. Usually, the animal understood his superiority and reluctantly submitted. Twice before in his life, the animals had still circled for a long while, calling their challenge, then physically attacked him, trying to win dominance. Sung expected that with this one. He could see the animal would not back down; he had not expected the complete lack of warning. He was still twenty feet away, the lion's eyes following him, when he took the first step to the side, to circle, to allow the male to watch him move. Soon, he had given in to the itching in his skin and taken his beast form. He started to smile; that moment always surprised them.

Anima

But instead, it leapt forward. No roar, no growl, no crouch to the dirt first.

It took him so entirely by surprise that Sung felt his side open under its claws before he shifted into his beast form and began to fight for his life.

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

Two days blended into three, and Joyce remained awkward and miserable. Talia was always kind when they ran into each other and would sit with her for meals. But she could tell her birdwoman did not want to be a daily tutor, so Joyce did not push for her company.

Twice during the day, she had seen one of the wolves she knew, Lucine or the male who had challenged Sung, in the circle watching her or standing nearby, their postures menacing. Erwin or one of his men always showed up in those moments, finding reasons to be nearby. But they'd also always disappear when the wolf moved on. Every time she left the city and headed down the path towards their cave, it was mere seconds before she noticed one of the guards in the trees nearby or walking the way ahead or behind her. She had no idea how they knew where to be and when. But she never made that walk alone. She also never made it with a friend. The guards did not chat or offer introductions. They just... guarded her. She knew she should be grateful, but somehow, it worsened her loneliness. As if there was a bubble around her that no one cared to pop.

No one except Gray.

Sitting at dinner that night, she had seen Gray as she walked into the market. Even though she did not know if inviting him to the podium with her broke customs, she decided she did not care. She beckoned him over when she caught his eye and asked if he wanted to join her for dinner. His eyes widened, but he said yes without hesitation, so she took that as a good sign.

As they ate, she continued to pick his brains. "Why didn't anyone tell me about the tribal cultures?" she said. "If they expect me to have these good manners or know how to approach them, why don't they just tell me?"

Gray ate like a starving man. He was nineteen, she had discovered. He was only a couple of years younger than her, though he looked younger and felt older. It was an odd combination. But Joyce was glad to have someone to talk to who was not treating her like a child or like they would rather be somewhere else.

Chapter Eight

The tribes of Anima

“We all have to learn the different tribes and their rules,” he said around a mouthful of deliciously tender dark meat. “But we learn those things when we are young. They kind of come; naturally, we can scent each other’s ancestry after all,” he grinned. “And when we made mistakes as kids, there would always be someone around who knew the right way to do it. And they would do it right before us so we could watch and learn. I have seen people try to do that for you, step in after you have done something. But you usually flee. I do not think you noticed. The problem is when Anima refused to learn if, as a child, I threw a fit and ignored what an adult was trying to show me, we would be disciplined. They can’t discipline a queen,” he pointed out. “But they also are not sure you are queen; it is all very confusing.”

Joyce snorted. “They think they are the ones who are confused?”

“Yes, they are,” he said frankly. And even though his tone implied she should understand and his compassion rubbed at her pride, she appreciated that he looked her straight in the eye and spoke to her like an adult. And that he did not pull any punches. It was uncomfortable, sometimes brutal. But he also did not seem to judge her for it; Joyce was so grateful he had been there the day before.

And she was grateful that she now had someone willing to answer all her questions. So, she took a deep breath and started asking.

“Other than the scent, how do you tell what tribes other people are from?” she asked Gray. “I can’t smell the difference on anyone. And I feel like if I ask-”

“Never ask!” he shuddered, swallowing his mouthful, eyes wide. “It is a huge offence to an Anima if you imply that you can’t tell what they are; it means that they are not true to their tribe. Don’t... definitely don’t do that.”

Joyce swallowed. She would come so close a couple of times! Why didn’t anyone tell her this?

“Okay, I believe you. So... how can I tell?”

Laurie Bowler

Gray's brow furrowed, and he looked out over the market. "I am so used to scenting I had not thought about... okay... we all look a little different, though you must be careful. The equines (horses) have long arms and legs but thick bodies. The Avalines, the birds are quite sharp in their features and often have long noses, but for creator's sake, don't ever mention it," he added hastily.

She nodded. "That is what Talia is, correct?"

Gray nodded, still scanning the tables. "The Lupines are wolves. They are usually quite muscular, and they hold themselves like predators."

"Like they want to hurt you?"

"Yes, that sense of threat. You will usually only get that from a wolf or a pissed-off Lion. Occasionally an Amphiline – especially the serpents."

"Serp- you mean snakes?" she shuddered.

Gray rolled his eyes. "What is it with humans and snakes?" he muttered. "I have read about this. What difference is there between a snake and a goat?"

"Snakes are so... sinister. So shifty, you never know they are there-"

"Well, that's certainly true, but they are our best trackers. And if you want to identify them... um... their ears are usually quite small, and they move gracefully."

Joyce looked around the floor but could not see anyone until she remembered that first night. "The guy who talked to Sung in the circle... Severus?"

Joyce nodded, more pleased than she had a right to be that she had picked it.

"There are goats and sheep; they are hard to know since they are both herd animals and prey. Most sheep have curly hair unless their families marry goats somewhere back in their line, but do not mention it again. They are sensitive for some reason. You will find both of them in the trades a lot. And the main difference you can see is in how they act. The goats are ruder, arguing or trying to haggle you on prices. Sheep prefer to go about their business and expect you to follow them."

Joyce was lost. Had she met anyone that felt like that? She did not think so. "I guess I will have to keep my eyes peeled."

Anima

Gray choked on his food. "Why would you peel your eyes?" he spluttered when he could breathe again.

Joyce groaned. "It is just a saying. It means to watch closely and look for something."

Gray shuddered. "Humans are weird. For such weaklings, you use very graphic metaphors," he muttered.

Joyce giggled. "I guess we do," she said. They ate quietly for a minute before Joyce remembered to thank him again for his help the day before. "I wish I had known these things earlier; what you said about how they have been trying to help and teach me, I feel terrible. I never meant to ignore anyone. It is just so different!"

Gray nodded. "I could see you were struggling. If Sung had not been so busy, he would have shown you. But the Leonine are always so sure of themselves, they forget that others are not," he said, a hint of bitterness in his tone.

Joyce frowned. "Leonine, the lions. That's what Sung is, and there's more of them?" She knew that Sung had mentioned it. But she had not met anyone that she could be sure of.

"There are a lot more females than males, which I guess is normal for them," he said, nodding to a table with three rows of women. "They are all leonine," he said. "And their pride has a hierarchy from the highest, Sung, down to the newest cub. Can you tell which woman is dominant at that table?" he said, pointing with his knife.

Joyce watched the women for a while. There were six of them at the table: a young one about her age and up to a woman with grey hair and wrinkles. Would it go by age? She remembered that they taught through behaviour and watched the women interact.

"That young one in the middle," she said a minute later. "She seems to be doing all the talking."

Gray shook his head. "That is just a personality thing. Fadya is a chatterer," he said good-naturedly. "No, dominance is not about how much attention you get; it is about who can give commands and who has to listen when given. Try again."

Joyce watched them a while longer and soon saw the woman at the head of the table, who looked like she was in her forties. She barely spoke other than indicate something on the table to the woman next to her, who immediately picked up the jug of juice from the centre and

Laurie Bowler

poured it for her. As Joyce watched, she began to see a dynamic between them all, where each woman kept her shoulders low or her eyes when she looked at certain others but raised her chin to others. She never dropped her eyes or her chin the entire time. All except that middle-aged woman at the head.

“It is the one at the head. She’s... they all listen to her.”

“That is right, well done, you learn fast.”

Joyce shrugged. She had always been a quick learner. If someone would explain what she needed to learn, that was.

“It is interesting,” she said, still watching the women. “That woman is not the biggest or the strongest. I thought dominance was about beating others into submission?”

Gray chuckled. “Those Leonine are all strong; do not worry about that. They are muscular like the wolves but... stronger. Weirdly, very confident, even the quiet ones and females are... I mean, I am no lion, so I would not pretend to understand it all, but somehow, the females make most of the decisions. It is weird. I have watched a lioness cuff Sung around like a child when she thinks he needs to eat or sleep more. And I have seen him ask them what he should do about things among the people and do what they say. And yet, he just... rules. Everyone in the pride listens when he speaks. It is extraordinary. He is so arrogant and sure of himself. Yet they often speak up and not very pleasantly. I do not understand it. You would need to have him explain it to you; I only know that women have a significant role in decisions. Especially about the home and their families, mating, that kind of thing.” Joyce blushed and wondered if he had heard the story about her interrupted mating. She suspected he had when Gray grinned back at her. But he did not mention it; he just continued his lesson. “But rest assured, Joyce, they do truly dominant fight very little. They do not have to. Everyone else can tell they will lose before they even start. So they do not have to fight much at all. It was only when someone else had a high opinion of themselves or if they were growing towards becoming dominant. At some point, Sung will have a challenger. Then we will see a fight for the ages.” Because Grey raised a hand, Joyce’s anxiety must have shown on her face. “Do not worry! That is decades away. Sung has been our strongest ruler for generations, and his father held the throne for almost forty years. No, dominance is not

Anima

about his looks or even his strength. It is more about intelligence and... attitude. Believe in yourself.”

“He has plenty of that,” Joyce muttered.

Gray laughed.

By the end of the meal, Joyce’s head was spinning. But she felt like she better understood whom she was dealing with. And she already had many questions for the next time she had a chance to talk to Gray. Now, if she could just get Sung back and get this mating thing over with, she might be able to start building a life among these people.

Laurie Bowler

SUNG

Sung returned to himself and lay on the forest floor, his clothes in bloodstained tatters around him from the sudden shift. He blinked, and it took a moment for his sight to clear, which was odd. But then a shudder rocked him, and he almost shifted again.

Fuck!

He had thought that shifting into his beast form to fight the silent one and exerting his dominance so aggressively would have satisfied the urge. But his body still wanted to transform and take and master him. What was wrong with him?

He rolled over to get to all fours and bit back a cry. His ribs pressing one hand to them provided that the beast had gotten its claws into him before changing. The swipe gave him a decent battering to his ribs as well. Ah well, at least the creature had gotten a taste of him before he had to kill it. He hated killing the silent ones when all they did was follow the instincts the creator gave them. Some of the Anima found a strange kind of sport in it, but Sung never had. Hunt for food, certainly. But never for the pleasure of it and never to create fear or pain for the animal.

Being far more careful now, Sung tucked his arm into his sore side and rolled slowly until he was on all fours, well, three, since he kept that arm tight. Four sets of feet appeared in front of him just as he was about to try to stand.

“Majesty! Are you all right?”

“I will be fine,” he said, then groaned as his back began to tremble and roll with the urge to shift again. Creator’s light. What was wrong with him? “Get back, step back!” he snarled, swallowing back the urge to change. He might not recognise them as allies if he shifted now with all these young males in front of him. His beast form worked almost purely on instinct. He knew himself, but only clearly when he was back in his flesh.

The four shuffled back but did not leave, obviously alarmed at what they saw. They could see his body rippling, trying to shift, naked as he was. These four were all just old enough to be past the age of those unintentional shifts that plagued the teenage boys of the pride. The older scouts would be exemplary; even if he did change, they would know to avoid him, except that young man who came with his father.

Anima

“Tell... Eryan... to get his son away...” he snapped, rolling his head to push back the mane that wanted to grow around his shoulders. “If we both shift...”

“Sire!”

“Do it! Tell the elders... if I do not return right away... lead me towards the city. But do not let me in! Take me... Khloe... she has a soothing...”

“But what is happening? Why-”

“No time...” he groaned, and it echoed in his chest with the rumble of his beast. “I will travel faster and better... as a beast anyway... just... don’t let me into the city. Bring Erwin... he will know what to do....”

The four continued to stare at him, wide-eyed.

“GO!” he roared, and they ran, sinking silently into the shadows as they should. But still, Sung did not let himself give over to the shift. The longer they had to get to the others and deliver the message, the better chance they had if he could not return; they had not prepared to deal with a frustrated, wounded ruler of all beasts, trying desperately to get back to his mate.

Oh shit! Joyce. She could not see him like this. She would be terrified. He let himself back down onto the forest floor, clenched his hands into fists and held on as long as he could. He gritted his teeth and fought for as long as he could, but something in him had lost control. The beast inside roared, swiping at him, trying to claw its way out. He did not know what had happened, what was causing such a fierce lack of control. But he would find out before he returned to his mate, as long as the men did what he said and got him to Khloe.

“Creator, please...” he murmured a prayer as his back began to stretch. “Let me come back to myself. Do not let me hurt Joyce, please.”

Then he gave up and sank into the teeth and claws of his Anima self.

The mighty king growled a moment later as he got to his four great paws and surveyed the little clearing, nostrils flaring as he took in the scents around him. Other males were nearby but moving away and still more out of range. He roared to let them know he was the king of this forest, and they would not do well to come into his territory. But his tail twitched, and he shook his head.

Laurie Bowler

His side hurt. He turned, looking for the challenger he had killed. It was sprawled not far away among the underbrush. But when he smelled it, he blew the breath out of his nostrils in alarm. There was a strange sharpness to its scent. He would not eat something unnatural from that carcass, no matter that he needed the strength.

No... He turned west and let a groaning huff resonate in his chest. The forest around him went utterly silent.

He needed his den to rest and heal. He needed his mate, so he would pad through the forest until he found her.

Anima

JOYCE

Two days later, Joyce and Gray walked the trails together. They had done it every day after breakfast, and Joyce hoped it would become a habit. She was learning a lot, and Gray was a fun and intelligent companion. And he spoke to her like she was human, although she supposed that was the wrong term to use here in Anima; he talked to her like she mattered. And not as if she were a child. She had not realised how inadequate she felt around these people until now.

As they followed the twisting path between the trees, she marvelled again at the community living among the branches. They passed a merchant carrying a large basket of obviously handmade bowls and cups; they were beautiful, and Joyce almost stopped the man. But when he reached them on the path, he looked sideways at Gray and stepped out to give them a wide berth as he passed.

Joyce frowned at him, but Gray ignored it.

“Why did he do that?” she asked as they stopped on the path to look back at the man who was hurrying away from them.

Gray tugged at her elbow. “Ignore it, I do,” he muttered.

“Ignore what? Why did he act like that? Like you were... sick or something?”

Gray shrugged and squinted at the path ahead, not meeting her eyes. “He is one of the old men. They have different ways of viewing the world. Much more superstitious. Anima, in general, is very wary of anyone different. And I am... different. I even smell wrong. So, they are all careful around me. But the older guys... they think something is wrong with me.”

Joyce put a hand on his upper arm. “I am so sorry! I can’t believe he acted like that. What do you mean you smell wrong? I do not smell anything on you; some of these people stink, so even I can see them.”

They both laughed, but Gray’s smile did not reach his eye. “Do not get involved, Joyce. You have got your journey to walk. You would not change the old Anima. But... when you have been accepted, remember those of us in your people who are different.”

“What are you talking about? I am different!” she said.

“You are also Sung’s mate,” he said dryly. Then sniffed. “Or at least, you will be soon. Trust me, that fact alone covers a multitude of sins.”

Laurie Bowler

“So what you are saying is, you need to find a good wife, and then they will stop treating you like you have the plague?” she said quietly.

But Gray’s face flattened. “I would settle for any wife at all.”

“But you are only nineteen!”

“If I was normal, I would have mated last year,” he said, his face dark.

“But Sung-”

‘Sung is the king; he took the crown right at the age of mating but was so busy that no one thought about it for a while. So, he got away with it. But even he came under pressure. Why do you think we had the right?’

“That is how royals get their mates, isn’t it?”

Gray laughed. “Ten generations ago, maybe,” he said. “But Sung could have taken a mate any time he pleased. The rite is political. A backup plan for when the royal can’t choose or wants to make a political marriage. The people insisted upon it because he was so far past the normal age of mating... I think some of the mothers worried he might never do it alone. It was not like he hurt for female company...” he trailed off as he realised whom he was talking to.

Joyce folded her arms. “It is okay. I know he is... popular.”

“But he has never even hinted at choosing a mate before, Joyce. There is something different between you two. I have never seen him attend to a female as he does to you. Mating for the sheer pleasure of it and taking a mate, joining your lives, are two different things in Anima. He has something special for you.”

“Oh really?” she asked dryly. “Where was the special attention, Gray? Was that when he left me alone at breakfast or took off in the middle of the night to beat up some lion?”

Gray snorted and flapped a hand at her. “Those are just things kings have to do. You will see that it is his life, not how he thinks and feels personally. He does those things because he knows he has to. And I think he kind of likes being needed. But the way he touches you and keeps you close, the light in his eyes when he looks at you, is new. I have never seen that before.”

They walked on, silent in their thoughts, until Joyce turned to him. “You observe a lot about people who do not know you are watching, don’t you?”

Anima

He shrugged again. "When you are different, you learn to read people well. You have to be; the wrong kind of attention can come anytime."

Joyce sighed. "I don't get it. What is it about you that is so different? You seem perfectly normal to me! The most normal person I have met here!"

Gray groaned. "Says the human, who has never stepped foot in Anima before."

"Fine, so explain it to me. You're good at this; teach me. Tell me what is so different about you so I can learn to judge and be cruel like others, then reject you for my new friends."

He grinned, but his heart was heavy as he spoke. "I am equine," he said, indicating his thick body, slim legs, and arms. "Equine are usually either warriors or merchants. We are strong, good runners, and we read the winds, meaning we can scent subtle changes in people and read individuals and a crowd. We make good advisors and good... well, you would call them salespeople," Joyce thought of Erwin and felt as if she better understood why Sung relied on him so heavily. "We are also beautiful," he said sadly, "in our beast forms. The only Anima who often transforms because we enjoy it and it allows us to travel quickly. We also keep our heads better in our beast forms."

Joyce's mouth had dropped open. "B-beast forms?"

"Well, I can't speak for myself, but... it seems like most equine still remember who they are when they shift, which many Anima do not. At least, not in detail."

"Shift into... beast form? You can-"

"No," he said darkly. "That is the problem. I can not transform," he said, tight and hushed. "I am the only equine who can't. I am a freak." Then he turned to look at Joyce, whose face was still wide with shock. He frowned.

"What?"

"You can... transform?"

"No, were you not listening? I can't; I am a freak."

Joyce swallowed and flapped a hand, trying to find words. "But... the others... the other equines?"

Gray frowned hard and tilted his head. "Anima, Joyce. All the Anima have a beast form. Another body that is waiting; you did not know this?"

Laurie Bowler

"No," she said faintly, "I did not."

Anima

SUNG

He was holding himself together by the tips of his claws. He stood at the path's edge, less than a day's travel from the city, shuddering. His skin quivered, and his beast tore at his insides. But he had to speak to them. He would be unable to keep it together long enough to get to Khloe. He had accepted that now. But that meant he needed a plan.

He called to the pride males again. They were coming on swift feet, but they had kept their distance as instructed, leading him in the right direction but not getting close enough for him to feel threatened. It was risky to bring them in, but he had to do it.

He could not return to Joyce like this, and his beast self was driven by nothing else. He would terrify her; she did not even know he could shift. He needed Khloe and her soothing tincture and Erwin and his steadying presence.

Damn, what was happening to him?

The young ones arrived first, less of a threat. The elders were wise to send them, but they were all nervous, trying to keep themselves proud and strong but looking at each other as much as he.

"You are fine... for now," he panted. "If I tell you to run, you do it."

"Yes, sire," they all replied.

He nodded, focusing on keeping himself as calm as possible. But with the wound on his side, his instincts for protection were kicking in harder and harder. Another shudder ripped through him, and he growled. The young ones tensed. He was not going to make it until the elders were close. But then Haydn crept up from between two trees beside him, and Sung heaved a sigh of relief. The elder was a steady presence but not dominant. A good choice for the first approach. He nodded, and Haydn padded toward him silently, eyes down and shoulders lowered.

"There is not much time," Sung said through his teeth. As he nodded to Sung, the elder motioned for the younger men to get behind him. "I can't control it. I do not know why... Tell Khloe it has been an urge since the ceremony, but... it became a struggle when the mating... was interrupted before we left to get the silent one. I need her to stop the shifts... I can't return to the den, to my mate, until she has – do you understand?" Haydn nodded again, still not meeting

Laurie Bowler

Sung's eyes. "You are a good man... get Erwin too. He will help talk me down. Even... even my beast recognises him. He might be needed if something happens..."

"You can trust us, majesty; we would not let anything happen."

"If it comes to it, you sedate me, understand? I will not punish anyone if that is what it takes. Do not let me put any of the people under threat!" Letting himself think about that and feel the tension was a mistake. He shuddered again and groaned, rolling his head on his shoulders to desperately push back the urge to shift. "Do you understand me, Haydn?"

"Yes! Yes, we do, sire. Do not worry. Everything will be fine," but he was already shrinking back into the trees, gesturing for the others to disappear, too. He could sense the shift coming, and Sung's scent was wary and prickly.

"Thank you, f-friend," he gasped, holding on with gritted teeth. "I will not forget this."

But the men were gone. He held out as long as he could. His last thought was a prayer for Joyce's safety.

And that she would not abandon him if she learned about his beast.

Anima

JOYCE

He had been explaining for almost an hour. It wasn't that she had difficulty understanding the concept after everything else she had seen in the past week; it wasn't hard to believe these people could transform. And, as she thought about it, it explained a lot about the metaphors they used and how they referred to themselves.

She had assumed when Sung referred to himself as a cub, he had been indulging his animal nature. But, no, she learned he had been a cub and a child.

It was... mind-boggling.

Gray was half-amused and half-hurt, she realised. The fact that he could not do this when everyone else could is a blow to him and made him stand out negatively. Joyce was trying to be sensitive to that while still trying to get her head around the fact that it even happened.

"Are you the only one who can't change in the whole of Anima?" she asked carefully.

Gray shook his head. "No, every tribe has two or three. Except us, I am the only equine."

She put a hand on his shoulder. "I am sorry; I mean, I haven't had that exact experience, but I was different back where I came from, too. The only one without a family. And... no one understood. It made me feel... wrong. Even though I felt like I was not. Except I knew I was different... it was just a lot."

His eyes came up to meet hers, and then, with a flash. "Yes," he said quietly. "That is how I feel."

"Do they exclude you? I mean, you were at the stall the day we met. Do they still buy from you?"

"Yes, mostly," he sighed. "The worst time was when I was young. The children can be cruel. Now, it is more peaceful, except when I run into the older ones and the fact that none of the females wants me. They are afraid their children will be wrong too."

"You are not wrong; you are just different," she said, rubbing his back.

He shrugged. "In the eyes of others, it amounts to the same thing."

"Well, I can tell you, if you were in the human world, you would be very desirable as a husband," she said, smiling. "You are tall, handsome, kind, funny, and want to marry. That is big where I am from."

Laurie Bowler

“Do the men not wish to have families?” he asked, confused.

“Not at your age, not usually,” she said. Then she smiled again. “So, if it ever gets really bad here, see if you can find a way into the human world. You will have a wife in no time,” she joked.

Gray laughed, too, but his eyes were distant.

Chapter Nine

The need of a mate and the mating call

SUNG

He was naked on a stone floor when he woke from his beast. His side ached terribly, but his body shook when he tried to push himself up, and he almost lost himself to the shift again.

For the first time, fear crept into his heart. What happened? How had he come to this place, and why wasn't it being appeased by his beast form?

He groaned as he rolled towards the light and found himself in a cage inside Khloe's den. She and the other pride leaders turned when he groaned and rushed to the bars.

"Don't open them yet," he croaked, raising one palm towards them. "I am not sure yet. Just... give me a minute."

The young Leonine were pale, watching him from behind their elders. He needed to be stronger. Khloe stood, her jaw tight and fists on her hips. She said something to Haydn, who was next to her, staring at Sung worriedly, but Sung was too busy biting back a wave of the urge to shift to pay attention. But he knew from her tone and posture that he would pay for this later. Soon, he could sit up and scoot himself back to lean against the rock wall, facing the others. Then, a door behind them slammed, and Erwin appeared next to Khloe, staring wide-eyed at Sung.

"What is going on?" Erwin demanded.

Sung growled. "The shift, I can't stop it."

"Did you scare off the silent one?"

"He killed it," Haydn said quietly. They were all silent for a moment, ignoring Sung's shame.

He gritted his teeth, squeezing his eyes closed to help him focus. "I lost control, Erwin. And it is getting worse. I have barely been able to stay myself for more than a few minutes since I shifted. It is getting harder every time instead of easier, and I am staying for shorter periods. I do not know why, but it--"

"I do!" Khloe snarled. Sung's eyes flew open, and he stared at her in shock, as did the other men.

Laurie Bowler

“What?” Sung asked hoarsely. “What’s happening to me?”

She pointed her finger at his chest. “What’s happening is that the mating bond was established but has not been allowed to snap into place. I tried to warn you, Sung. This is what comes of taking a human wife; you should have listened to the histories!”

“I do not have time for histories right now. I need to know what to do to stop the shifting!”

“You need to, mate!”

“I was about to,” he ground out, glaring at Erwin, who shifted on his feet. “But I got called away,” he winced, holding back the shift. “And now... I can’t mate her as a lion. She does not have a beast form.”

“She would not be the first female to take her husband as a beast; some even enjoy-” Khloe snorted.

“Do not finish that sentence!” Sung snarled, then had to breathe heavily for several seconds to get himself under control.

“Stay calm,” Khloe said, the heat out of her voice. “Just relax.”

He gave her a look but took a deep breath and spoke quietly. “This is her first time. And our mating bond, I will not... sully it that way.”

Khloe nodded, sighing.

“I need that tincture you have, Khloe,” he said finally. “The one you gave me when I was an adolescent.”

Khloe’s lips thinned. “You are so much stronger now, Sung. So much more of yourself. I can’t even be sure it would work.”

“Well, there is only one way... to find out...” he groaned. “Please, it’s getting worse.”

Khloe threw up her hands, growling. “We can only try, I suppose,” she hurried over to a cupboard near the kitchen and looked through the bottles. “We need to wrap that wound too; otherwise, you are going to get infected, which will not help with the urge to shift.”

Sung nodded. “Just give me the medicine first, then wrap it quickly. I am not sure how much longer I have got,” he shivered and rested his head against the wall, breathing deeply, fighting to keep himself under control.

Anima

Thoughts of Joyce, her face, and her smell helped at first. And he focused on their memories and how he had loved her for so long. But he could feel the desire rising in him the longer he thought of her. And if Khloe was right, that would only create more problems.

“Hurry,” he snarled.

“Thick-headed Alpha male bullshit,” Khloe growled as she unlocked the cage and hurried in. “Always so sure of yourselves until you fail, then it is hurried, hurry, hurry, woman and fix this for me.”

Ignoring the muttering of the female that threatened his temper, Sung tipped his head, and Erwin moved to block the open doorway, keeping the other back.

Khloe knelt before him and poured a dollop of foul-smelling syrup into a spoon, spooning it into Sung’s mouth like she did when he was a cub. Then, with a grimace, she poured a second dose and gave him that as well. Sung spluttered; the stuff tasted horrible, but he forced himself to swallow it. While he was still shaking his head and making faces, Khloe moved to the wound on his side, touching and growling when he batted her hand away when she felt the tender spot.

“I will wager that rib is broken and maybe the one above. And you have dirt in the wounds. You need to stop running around playing the hero and rest, Sung.”

“I will, as soon as I can stop shifting.”

“And that is not helping, either.”

“I am aware,” he ground out as she rubbed salve into the wounds and began wrapping his chest. “Hence my current position on your floor,” he was still panting, and if he wasn’t dreaming, the urge to shift was already fading. He blinked and looked at her. “I think it is working.”

“You are calm. But don’t do anything yet, sire,” she said sarcastically. “It takes a good hour to work completely, but it might be faster with that dose. But probably more erratic, too. So, for the creator’s sake, sit here and stay calm.”

He nodded and looked at Erwin, who was staring with open worry.

“How is my wife?” he asked quietly.

Erwin blinked, then nodded. “She’s fine. She has made a couple of friends, I think. And... she learned a little while you were gone.”

Laurie Bowler

“Good, good,” Sung winced again as Khloe tugged at the bandages around his chest. “Who is following her right now?”

“She is at the market with Gray. They are going to the reading after the meal. I asked Van to take over when I came to your summons.”

“You were watching her?” Sung frowned. “But Van was with you?”

“He was in the square. I sent him back as I passed. She was not alone, Sung. She is fine. It was more important for me to come -”

“What?!” Sung snarled.

Khloe froze, one hand on his shoulder. “Sung, breathe.”

“You left her unattended?!”

“For a few moments, Sung, I knew exactly where she was and with whom. It was more important to be here -”

“Nothing is more important than her safety, do you understand? Nothing!”

Khloe had stood and was slowly backing away from him with no fear on her face but the wary crouch of a female with enough experience to know when to step softly. “Sung,” she said calmly. “You need to -”

“Stop telling me to be calm when my wife is out there, under wolf eyes, without her GUARD!” his breath came hoarse and rough, his shoulders heaving. For a moment, he struggled against conflicting forces, one that urged him to shift, the other that attempted to block it. He could see the eyes of those watching widen. “Nothing!” he huffed, but instead of a huff, he released an earth-shattering roar when he thought of his wife in the forest, alone.

Why was he in this den? Why did all those eyes stare like cubs?

With a snarl, he shot for the open door. Everybody moved swiftly out of his path as he ran out of the den and into the twilight outside the den; he paused only to scent the wind. His side ached, but he was king. He would heal.

His mate. She was here, somewhere near, and he needed her.

Anima

JOYCE

She'd had a lovely dinner with Talia, and Gray had also sat with her for a while. The entire city was planning to attend what they called a reading that night, apparently, some kind of show where actors read a story in the amphitheatre. Joyce was eager to see and share the experience; she's yet to see the entertainment in Anima. But staring at Sung's empty chair again for the whole meal had worn her out. The weight of his absence pressed down on her. There was still no news about where he was or why he'd been gone for so long. And the worry burrowed under her skin. She had barely slept the night before, thinking of all the things that could have gone wrong and stroking the furs where he last lay. She had even given in and curled up on his sleeping platform to be close to his smell.

The irony was when she knew that the entire cave smelled like her to him. But if she buried her face in his furs, she could smell that pine and rain mixed with that uniquely male tang that was only him.

A wave of tiredness hit her as she stood from the table, and she made excuses to her two friends. "I am sorry, but I am just wiped out. Next time?"

Gray shrugged and waved as he walked out. Talia paused, though.

"Are you okay?"

Joyce shrugged. "I just... I hate not knowing what's going on."

Talia looked sympathetic. "I know we would have had news if there was something serious. It could be simply that the animal tried to get around him and kept coming. He would not leave until he was sure the city was safe. Try not to worry."

Joyce nodded and forced a smile. "Thank you, I will try. I think I just need to sleep tonight."

"Yes, you must be well rested for when he comes back. Assuming his balls have not dropped off from lack of use," she said with a grin.

Joyce blushed but forced herself to laugh. "I will make sure to check when he gets home."

Talia gave her an approving nod. "We will make an Anima out of you yet, Joyce. Sleep well."

"Thank you, I will."

Laurie Bowler

As she left the market, she walked against the flow as everyone else moved toward the centre of the tree city. The readings were popular; even the stall holders were packing up early. For a moment, she stopped. Should she go, too? But no, her limbs felt heavy, and her eyes grainy. She needed sleep. There would be another reading, and maybe she and Sung could enjoy it together. With a heavy sigh, she descended the path out of the city and towards the cave.

Not until she had walked for a few minutes did she realise there were no other sounds around her. No other people, no footsteps, no voices calling, not even the sounds of birds or the scabble of wildlife. She stopped for a moment and looked around. It was not until then that she realised the forest had a rhythm. A constant hum of activity from the city's citizens or the natural world. She wanted to stand there and enjoy the silence and solitude for a moment, but something itched between her shoulder blades. Why were the creatures silent?

She looked around, peering between the trees, but could not see or hear a thing. Not even a breath of wind in the leaves. She was about to start walking again when she heard the faint snap of a twig off to her left. Joyce gasped and looked into the growing darkness. She was alone. Utterly alone.

And that is when she realised that it had never happened before. Every time she left the city before, the guards had appeared at least twice to follow her on the path or through the trees, and she had never been alone until now.

Where were they? The hairs on the back of her neck stood in fear as Joyce whipped around to see a shadow move behind a tree.

"Whose there?" she called out, trying to strengthen her voice. But there was no answer.

There was a quiet thud on the edge of the clearing behind her, and she whipped around again. At first, she thought there was no one there, then suddenly, her eyes glowed in the darkness the same way she had seen Sung's eyes glow in the black cave at night.

"Who are you?" she demanded, crouching down to pick up a stone from the side of the path. "What do you want?"

Like a disapproving snort, a tiny huff of air sounded off to her right, and she turned again, lifting the rock. But there was nothing.

Anima

“Joyce...” a voice whispered behind her, and she whirled around, throwing the rock, but it snapped a twig and bounced harmlessly off the tree trunk.

She could have sworn she heard a snigger of laughter but could not see or hear anything else. She ran down the path towards the cave, pushing herself, sprinting, forcing her legs to keep going even when they began to burn, and her throat ached with the heaving of her breath. She knew she was out of shape and an embarrassment in the world of Anima and cursed herself for it. Behind her, far in the distance, she heard a crowd roar that sounded as if hundreds of people had raised their voices all at once. The stories must be exciting.

Was she going to die out here, in the dark, by herself, while everyone else celebrated? Not if she had any choice in the matter.

But she could not deny that no matter how much she pushed herself to run faster, she could not shake the feeling of someone watching her.

Laurie Bowler

SUNG

Her scent was everywhere, but it did not take long for him to find the most recent trail and the predatory scents mixed with it. Sung followed the wolves as they tracked Joyce. They were weaving in and out of the tree, crossing paths and taunting her so they could appear and disappear on opposite sides as she made her way down the trail to the cave.

His mate was being hunted, and his heart raced. With a swallowed snarl, he leapt between the trees, darting through them to reach the clearing before the cave ahead of him. He located a spot where she had stopped and smelt the spike of fear.

JOYCE

Joyce had almost reached the clearing with breath tearing in her throat, pulse pounding in her ears, and her feet slapping the dirt trail. She prayed that the guards were there, waiting, that all of this was some kind of mistake. She could see the light of the lanterns beginning to peek between the trees as the path widened when a shadow appeared on the trail twenty feet ahead of her, and she slid to a stop. She almost fell when she turned to go back, but a shadow of another man stepped out of the trees from that direction, too. She turned again, but there was a rustling in the bushes to that side.

Panicked and backing away, she grabbed another rock from between the tree roots, but the path towards the clearing was clear again when she stood. But would one of them be waiting to ambush her?

“Who are you? What do you want?” she screamed, putting as much anger as she could into her voice. But she trembled from head to foot. She felt helpless against these people.

Did they think this was a joke? Was it some kind of Anima initiation? Was someone going to leap out of the bushes with a balloon while laughing and then tell her that this is how they accept new members to the club?

A low growl pattered behind her, and Joyce froze. This was no joke. She tightened her grip on the rock, wishing desperately that she saw better in the shadows between the trees. In

Anima

the last effort to help herself, she took one more mad dash down the trail towards the clearing, but feet pounded alongside her, and before she could break out of the trees, a man stepped out already in the clearing, and his arms hung loosely at his sides.

Joyce slid to a stop, panting as more male and female figures materialised from the sides. No doubt there was another behind her. She didn't recognise them, though they all looked fairly young. The man in front of her smiled, and his eyes glowed; his teeth flashed in the light of one of the lanterns in the clearing.

"Oh, look," he said softly. "It is our Queen."

One of the others huffed.

"What are you doing here?" she snapped. "Why are you following me?"

"Because you are a stain on Anima's skin, Queen Joyce, a stone hung around the neck of our people. So, we will do what no one else has the strength or courage to do. We will remove you," she met the woman's gaze in the dark.

"If you kill me, you will only bring your king down on your heads," she snarled.

The woman shrugged, smiling. "I will take the risk."

The two men chuckled.

"You might take me," she said, hefting the rock in her hand, "but even if you win, my husband will tear out your throats."

"Too bad you would not be here to see it, isn't it, Joyce?"

As she turned to look at the man who had spoken, she immediately realised her mistake because the rush of movement from her other side forced her to whip back around. She turned just in time to see the woman leaping at her, mouth open and teeth baring just as a mighty snarl echoed through the trees and a massive lion landed on the dirt before her.

It was huge, shoulder level with her own and a chest almost as broad as she was tall. Its tail whipped back and forth as it crouched, ready to pounce.

Joyce froze, terrified.

But it was not looking at her.

Its back was to her, facing the three wolf-people, a low snarl guttering in his throat.

Laurie Bowler

SUNG

His mate was in danger; his mate was afraid.

He had torn between the trees to head them off but reached the spot almost simultaneously: the people who smelled like kin. Something deep in his head had a memory of that. But he could not be distracted.

His mate was afraid and trying to escape. He would remove the danger. As she turned, looking for a way out, her heart beat rapidly; like a little bird, he leapt to land between her and the predators just as the female charged. She almost bent herself in half, attempting to avoid him, but she was already in flight. She yelped and tried to turn as she landed, but he cuffed her, and she tumbled into the dirt at his feet, stunned.

He let the growl roll in his chest so the males would hear it. They had both crouched when he appeared, but they both submitted immediately at the sound of his dominance and seeing him standing before them, proud and ready. The young were so hasty to hunt, so quick to fail. The female found her feet and scrabbled backwards, away from him, closer to the males, who both stood with their heads down and shoulders rounded, their eyes at his feet. The female, breathing quickly, looked at them. He snarled, and she shook, dropping to her knee, chin almost on her chest.

The proper posture before a king.

With the three hunters subdued, he turned his great body to find his mate wide-eyed, hands clutched to her chest. He inhaled deeply, but there was no blood save that in her veins. She had not been touched. Her racing heart trembling was fear only, not pain. A small part of him sagged, and something inside him pressed him to... change.

He made the call of the mate, the question. But she just stared at him. He stepped forward, shaking his mane and called again. She stumbled back a step, her heart still pounding.

What was wrong? What frightened her?

He turned to look for another hunter, but the three remained submitted. So, he turned back and met her eyes; the eyes were so strange yet called to him.

She did not look right, and she was not Leonine, but she was his.

If he knew nothing else, he knew that. The question was, did she?

Anima

JOYCE

For the second time since arriving in Anima, Joyce had a moment of seeing her death reach for her, followed by a shocking interruption. As the wolf-woman pounced, a vast, snarling lion landed on the dirt before her. The wolf-woman yelped as the lion cuffed her from the air, and she tumbled to the ground. Within seconds, this creature had all three of the wolves bowing, eyes down, no more swagger, no more sharp promises for her fate.

But then this... thing turned to her, and Joyce's heart leapt into her throat. Pounding feet behind her announced yet more arrivals, but Joyce was frozen in this massive animal's golden gaze. But she recognised Erwin's voice behind her when he spoke.

"Joyce, it is Sung. He is just... it is Sung!"

Joyce blinked. She had seen those deep golden eyes the other night in Sung when they were interrupted, and Erwin asked him to return.

This was Sung? This was his beast form? Was this what Gray meant when he said they all could change? Sung groan-huffed; the noise was so deep and resonant in his chest that Joyce felt it in the ground under her feet.

"Sung?" she breathed.

He huffed again, ending in a sound that was almost a purr. He stepped towards her, his massive paw so huge she could not have circled it with both hands. Standing on all fours, he looked her in the eye.

She trembled as she stepped forward, reaching toward his face.

"Joyce, no!" Erwin hissed behind her, but she ignored him. "He would not, in this form, he does not think like -"

She shook her head to silence him. There was something in those eyes. This was Sung, and he knew her, she thought.

"Is that you?" she breathed, her shaking fingers splayed out.

He groaned and pushed his muzzle into her palm, his soft fur and warm skin a shock after the chill of fear. She scratched the side of his face like she used to do to her pet cat, Bessie, when she was a child. Like Bessie, he leaned into the attention, his eyes closed and lifted his chin for her to scratch underneath.

Laurie Bowler

“Sung... you are beautiful... but....” He snorted out a breath, and she felt the force of it on her arm.

She swallowed hard. “Please, come back. I have missed you, please,” she sighed as he pulled out of her hand and met her eyes again. She could not decide whether they were the picture of the warmth of his heart or the cold darkness of his willingness to kill. “Please?”

He turned his great head, tail lashing again, and scanned their surroundings. Then, glancing at her, he walked into the clearing properly. Hesitantly, she followed, not sure she was reading him correctly. But once she stood with open air around her, he began to walk a circle, scenting the air and sniffing the ground, huffing every time she started to move.

By the third time, she put her fist on her waist. “I am not going anywhere; I just want to watch you.” He growled, but it was playful, she thought.

To Joyce's surprise, Erwin and the others surrounded the young wolves and sent them back to the city alone. Sung paused in his search to watch them go. But when they came to join her in the clearing. Sung eyed them until they circled her. She could not tell if he approved, but he did not make any noise at them, just continued in larger circles, spiralling out to check the clearing.

“She is safe, Sung,” Erwin called eventually. “Come back; she is safe.” Sung looked at Erwin over his shoulder, then disappeared into the trees.

Joyce looked at Erwin, who was frowning at the tree line where he had disappeared. “What is he doing?” she asked quietly.

“Either he caught a scent he wants to check out, or he does not want you to see him transform. But I do not see how... he is not usually that thoughtful as a beast. We have to be careful with him. His dominance takes over and -“

Joyce gasped as completely naked Sung appeared in the moonlight, walking towards them, his body sculpted in silver and shadow. He looked magnificent, although his shoulders were rolled forward and his steps shorter than usual.

“Sung,” she breathed and ran towards him, throwing her arms around his neck.

He grunted but pulled her into his chest with one arm, swinging her around, immediately putting her down and searching her eyes.

Anima

“Are you okay?” his nostrils flared, and he searched her from head to toe, then pulled her back into his chest. “You are safe, thank the creator, you are safe,” he said, his voice heavy with relief.

“I am fine, thanks to you!” she said into his chest, surprised by the sudden well of emotion that made her throat pinch and eyes blur. “Sung, that was -”

“Erwin?” Sung’s voice was deep and sharp with disapproval, and his eyes shone with anger. Joyce turned to see Erwin, though Sung kept his arm around her and did not let her step from his side.

Erwin stepped up, almost to her feet, and knelt before her. “Please forgive me, my queen,” he said. “I failed you.”

“What? You didn’t do anything! It was the wolves -”

“They should not have had an opportunity to reach you,” Sung snarled, his chest heaving as he snorted a breath.

Erwin paled. “I left my post, and... clearly, your plans changed. Please forgive me, Joyce; it will not happen again.”

“Of course; he wasn’t even with me! How was he supposed to know?”

Sung spoke to her, but his eyes were as hard as flint as he stared at his second-in-command. “He was watching over you, Joyce, from a distance while I was gone. When he learned I had called for him, he should not have come until he had made sure the guards were in place. For the exact reason we just witnessed.”

Erwin’s shoulders sagged in his bow. “I beg for your forgiveness, too, my king.” Sung glared at him for a moment, and Joyce’s heart raced. The two were so close! Surely Sung would not let this come between them?

“Gareth,” she hissed and elbowed him. He flinched, which surprised her. She must have caught a rib with her elbow. Before, she had not even been able to make him move. Erwin did not leave his bow, but his eyes popped to her in surprise, and Sung growled at him. She caught the light of humour in the equine’s gaze before he looked away. Then she turned back to Sung. “You know, if you had told me that I was supposed to have guards all the time, I would not have started walking back without them,” she said quietly, stroking his chest with one hand because

Laurie Bowler

she needed to touch him. Turning to face him suddenly reminded her of how naked he was. She kept her eyes on his face, swallowing hard.

But Sung still glared at the horse-man and snarled between his teeth.

“Your awareness should not have made an ounce of difference to his job, which was to keep you safe while I was gone!” he ended in a shout that echoed off the mountain and over the trees.

All the equines flinched.

Chapter Ten

Vulnerable king. Thoughts in the dark, confessions, allies, hear the queen.

Tension rose in the clearing as Sung scowled at the men bowing before him, and they stayed frozen under his disapproving gaze. But before Joyce could try to make peace again, Sung tensed, and the others all turned to look backwards to the path into the clearing.

“Who is coming?” Sung asked, and Joyce was surprised, first that he did not know and, secondly, by the edge of fear in his voice.

Erwin made a strange whistle, and one of the men behind him leapt to his feet and ran swiftly towards the path, his spear drawn. But he was gone barely seconds before he came jogging back. “The guards returning,” he called as he rejoined the men in the bow before Sung and Joyce.

Sung grunted and pulled Joyce tighter to his side, kissing her hair as the people emerged from the forest. “If they say anything to you, let me handle it,” he whispered, his body swaying against hers.

Joyce frowned but nodded. “Sung, are you all right?” but her attention was distracted by the appearance of new people.

The guards arrived first, and Joyce recognised a man near the front; she thought his name was Faryth. As they fanned out to surround the clearing and positioned themselves to watch the woods, Khloe walked straight towards Sung, her strides quick and purposeful.

When she reached them, her brow lined with worry. She nodded once at Joyce and then spoke straight to Sung. “How bad is it?”

“The shifting and running...” he trailed off, then Joyce felt him sway again, and she gasped, turning to grab him, but there was nothing to hold onto as his massive form crumpled to the ground.

“SUNG!” she screamed.

It took three guards to carry Sung into the cave, and they struggled. Khloe issued calm orders for them to place him in his furs, sent the fourth runner to the city to call a helper, and asked Erwin to describe precisely what happened.

Laurie Bowler

“He beat us here,” Erwin said, his tone sheepish. “By the time we arrived, he had already put the wolves down.”

Khloe looked at Joyce.

“He came out of nowhere,” she said, one hand on his thigh as the men laid down and covered him with the furs. “He landed between the wolf that was attacking me and hit her to the ground and me -”

“They attacked?” Khloe said, her eyes wide with shock in the first genuine expression she had shown in Joyce’s presence.

Joyce nodded. “One did, and he hit her, so she fell. Then, all three of them bowed and did not move. Then Erwin and the others arrived and -”

“He stalked the whole clearing before walking into the forest to transform. When he came out, he was not walking free,” Erwin said darkly.

Khloe sighed. “At least the tonic should keep him in this form for a while. But he must keep taking it until he can complete the mating.”

Joyce blinked. “I am sorry... did you say -”

Khloe turned on her, her face determined. “He was wounded in the fight with the silent one,” Joyce covered her mouth with her hands. “He will heal. But he must stop shifting to allow his blood to work. Right now, his Anima instincts are pressing him to his beast form because the mating bond has not been completed. He knows until you are his, you could be taken by another male, forcing the beast out to protect and take you.”

Joyce's mouth opened and closed and opened again. “I... I did not know....”

“Now you do. For the creator’s sake for Anima, take your husband as soon as possible. Do not leave him vulnerable to his fear for you. Do not embolden his enemies,” Joyce swallowed and nodded, avoiding the eyes of all the men in the room hearing this conversation. “Until then, he must take two spoonfuls of this at sunrise and sunset,” Khloe went on as if her instructions were nothing of note. She passed Joyce a green bottle. “It will help him control the shift until he can complete the mating.”

Cheeks hot, Joyce took it and nodded again. “I will make sure.”

Anima

“Good. When things have settled, come speak with me. The women’s council would like to guide our Queen. And we can help you navigate these waters better than the men.” Erwin straightened from checking Sung’s eyes and pushed out a breath. Khloe rolled her eyes and flapped a hand at him. “Alpha-male bullshit,” she muttered. “So busy knowing everything, they forget that some of us used to wipe their asses before they could do it for themselves.”

Erwin’s face coloured, and Joyce stifled a laugh, delighted at how easily the woman set these men down. Khloe’s eyes lit with humour, though she did not smile. She leaned into Joyce’s ear and whispered loud enough for the men to hear. “The secret is to compliment them all the time for everything. Then they do not pay enough attention to see how you fixed everything while they were busy strutting.”

Joyce choked as Erwin’s shoulders crawled towards his ears, and Khloe turned back the furs over Sung’s body to reveal an angry red wound on his ribs.

The urge to laugh disappeared as Joyce saw it and rushed closer. But Khloe already had a basket of salves and bandages out. “Let us get this wrapped while he is still out. It would not feel good, and the pain will press him toward the shift again.”

Joyce swallowed hard and stepped up, following the wise woman’s instructions as best she could and trying desperately to remember everything the woman was showing her.

Joyce was still swallowing the pinch of tears when they cleaned the wound and dressed before Sung started to stir. She rushed to his head as his eyes fluttered and held his shoulder down along with Erwin on his other side when he tried to sit up.

“Rest, Sung, please. You need to stay lying down.”

He blinked a few times before his eyes locked on hers and sighed. “You are safe”, he said foggily.

She nodded, biting her lip. “I am fine. You kept me safe. Thank you, now you can rest. The others are here and will ensure we are both safe until you are better.”

Khloe caught her eyes momentarily, grinning, and Joyce’s heart lightened.

“Behr?” Sung rasped.

“I am here,” he said, stepping closer to the platform so Sung could see him.

“The wolves?” Sung growled, his body tense under her hands.

Laurie Bowler

“They went to the elders as you instructed. The elders will bring them to the next security council.”

“Watch them. I do not believe that was unsanctioned.” Erwin nodded, his face dark. Joyce took Sung's hand, wound her thin fingers between his thick lines, and sighed. “So glad you are safe, Joyce,” he breathed.

“I am fine; just rest, please.”

He nodded and slipped back to sleep.

Anima

SUNG

He was woken by pain in his side when he tried to roll over. He groaned and rolled the other way, running into a warm body that jerked him awake.

“Sung? Are you okay?” Her hair fell over her face, and her mouth was open, eyes wide in the dark as she leaned over him, pushing his hair back from his cheek and touching his chest.

“I am fine. Hush, love, I am fine,” he said, reaching with his good arm to brush the hair back off her face and over her shoulder. “It is good to see you,” he rumbled.

She sighed. “You too, you scared me.”

He grimaced. “Yes, I am sorry about that. It was instinct to get to you, and in my beast form, I do not think the same way -”

“No, Sung, I meant when you collapsed. Khloe said you kept shifting even when you should not, which has worsened the injuries. She is worried you will get an infection.”

Sung grumbled a few choice words. “I will be healed in two days, and she knows it,” he muttered.

“Not if you keep shifting. You have to be careful, Sung. She said you are re-injuring it every time.”

He considered his body then. If he was this solid now, he was going to be okay. The itch was still in his skin but not difficult to deny. And she was lying next to him, barely clothed.

“I think the worst of it has passed,” he said, then touched her face. “How are you? I missed you.”

Her face softened, and her cheeks bloomed with the heat he loved.

“I missed you, too,” she said softly. “I even offended Erwin by accidentally startling him while trying to find out when you would be back. I had to go back and try again. Why did you not tell me that Anima teaches by showing? Everyone has been trying to show me how to act correctly. I have been offending them by apologising and leaving instead of trying again! I had no idea. I am so embarrassed.”

“Let them be offended, Joyce. They must learn that change or being different is not always bad.”

Laurie Bowler

“Well, that is the pot calling the kettle black,” she said dryly. Sung did not understand the reference, but she was leaning on his good side, so her hair fell over his chest, and her scent washed over him. Sung nearly groaned. Instead, he twisted his fingers into her hair and pulled her in for a kiss. She came willingly. So willingly, Sung pulled back and stared at her.

“Khloe said something to you about the mating, did she not?”

“Yes! I can’t believe you did not tell me, Sung! Why do you keep hiding these things from me?”

“Because I did not want to press you. You had been through so much. I felt you needed time to adjust, and I can wait.”

“Oh, really?” she said, one eyebrow in a sceptical expression that reminded him so much of his late mother; Sung lost his breath for a second. “You haven’t been having any trouble because we put it off? None at all?”

“Well, maybe a little,” he admitted. “But I always knew it was just a matter of time. I told everyone else to stop pushing; we would get there, and I knew we would. And, when you think about it, this is Erwin’s fault for interrupting us when -”

Joyce groaned and rolled away onto her back, her head still resting on his arm but her hands over her face. “So freaking embarrassing,” she moaned into her palms. “They all saw -”

“They saw nothing,” Sung growled. “I made sure of it.”

She snorted but did not argue. “I had no idea how it was affecting you, Sung. You should have told me; you should have told me all these pressures you have been under.”

His eyebrows popped up. “Why? They are my loads to carry, not yours. I am king -”

“Oh, cut the crap, Sung. I swear, you act like you are more human or something,” they both froze for a second, then he snorted a laugh, and Joyce groaned. “You know what I mean.”

“I know, I know. And I love that you care, Joyce. You are a diamond among females, and I am so glad the creator brought you to me,” he had meant the words to sound sweet, but there was a breathlessness in them that he had not intended, and she heard it.

She rolled over again, leaning on her elbow next to him to meet his eyes, though he suspected she saw very little in the deep darkness of the cave.

Anima

"I can't believe I am going to say this," she said softly. "But I am glad I am here. I mean... I wish it had not taken the rite to get me here. I wish you would have come to find me, and we would come here together, and I had time to prepare. And I wish I could have said goodbye to my friends. But when you were gone all those days, Sung. It was not the world I was thinking about. It was you."

Sung's heart swelled. He had not expected such a declaration from her so quickly. He pushed onto his elbow to face her, groaning as he pulled his sore side up, and she hissed. But he got there and, after a breath, could relax. She was so small next to him, but her face tilted up to look at him, so they were nose to nose.

He, very gently, took her face in his hand. "You were all I could think about, no matter what form I was in," he said hoarsely. "Joyce, can I kiss you?"

"You can always kiss me, Sung. You do not have to ask. Unless I am mad at you. Then it's probably better to -"

But he took her lips to stop the words, and she sighed into his mouth, her little hand sliding up to cup his neck. And he let her, stunned by the fact that he felt no urge to move her hand away. Usually, every instinct screamed against letting anyone near his neck – where his lifeblood flowed so close to the surface. The jugular was Anima's most vital, most vulnerable spot. Certain death if exposed to the wrong person. Yet, she had offered hers to him the first time they had kissed, and he had been humbled. Now, her touch flamed on his skin, and his breath came faster as he tilted his head to deepen the kiss.

Joyce whimpered in her throat and clung to him. Ignoring the spear of pain in his side, Sung rolled her back to lean over and kiss her properly. A few minutes later, her breath thundering in his ear, she forgot about his wound and dragged her hand down his side. He winced and jerked away, and she gasped.

"I am so sorry, Sung!"

"Shhhh, it's fine; I am fine."

"No, you are not! Khloe said you need to rest until healed."

"I promise, there is more healing in your lips than anywhere else in the cave," he said dryly, but when she pushed gently at his shoulder, he sighed and laid back down, breathing

Laurie Bowler

carefully until the pain in his ribs eased. Sung found her hand and twined their fingers, and she rolled over to hold his hand in both of hers. They lay there, staring at the black ceiling until their breathing returned to normal.

“Are you going back to sleep?” she whispered.

He shook his head. “I do not think so.”

“Then... I have something I have to tell you.”

Sung blinked. She sounded uncertain. He wanted to look at her, measure her while she spoke. But he suspected she was gathering courage and would not appreciate the scrutiny.

“You can tell me anything,” he said. “I will always keep your secrets.”

“And your own,” she grumbled. “That is part of what I need to talk to you about.”

“Okay,” he waited, and she sighed.

“Why didn’t you transform for me? Or at least tell me that you could? That all the Anima can?”

Sung took a deep breath, then winced when his ribs complained.

“I do not often transform at all. It is not my natural form; this is. But I use the beast for battle or sometimes for tracking; the senses are even stronger. As for showing you... I was afraid it would frighten you. You had already been through so much...”

“I do not just mean now, though. I mean, when we were kids, too.”

“I was just a child, Joyce.”

“I told you everything,” she said, and he realised she was hurt. “I mean, I know we were really little. It was just a friendship for me then. But I trusted you. I told you everything, all the things I wanted, everything I was scared of. I thought... I thought we were best friends. That you trusted me.”

He swallowed, unused to feeling so uncertain about the best way forward.

“I can tell you what I wanted to tell you. I wanted to show you, but I had to be careful. Most of the human world has zero knowledge of Anima, and we need to keep it that way. There are resources here that humans would exploit if they could find a way. When I was taken there as a child, it was made very clear to me how important it was to remain silent about my blood to appear being groomed to lead. It was forced upon me that betraying that knowledge to anyone

Anima

was treason to the people. But even so... I almost did tell you," she sighed and pulled her hand out of his grip to lay it on his chest, though she just rested it there. He put his hand over hers, pinning it to his skin.

"And now? When I was here, and I could not be a threat to anyone anymore?" she asked carefully.

"I was afraid you would be scared of me," he said honestly, surprised by how hard it was to admit. "I was afraid you would reject me if you knew."

"But you know how much I love animals!"

He turned his head to find her eyes. "Not like that unless there is something else you need to tell me," he said, half-grinning, half-afraid. She groaned at the joke, but she did not smile. He squeezed her hand, pinning it to his chest when it felt like she might remove it. "Joyce, there are many things I would change if I could go back not just this week but years past. There are many things I will tell you. Things I would do, ways I would make things... different. But I cannot. More than human or not, I cannot turn back time," he smiled when she snorted. "You have surprised me," he said, and it was all true. "I was so certain this would be too much that you would break under the strain of it. Instead, you have... bloomed. I am sorry I underestimated you. I will try not to do it again."

"I'm not saying I don't need help with all this," she said softly. "I do, I do. That is what I want you to hear; you need to tell me more. Explain more; help me understand how you think, how these people think. I am flying blind, but... I want to; I want to be here with you. But I will keep putting my foot in everything if no one tells me how things work."

"Your foot? Why your foot?" he asked, confused.

She groaned again. "It is just saying it means I will step wrong. Do the wrong thing."

"Oh, right. I see."

"I need you to talk to me, Sung. Tell me how things are done here and why they are so different. Trust me to understand or, at least, trust that I will try to. And if we are going to do this together... mates... for real..., do you want that?"

"There is nothing I want more," he whispered.

Laurie Bowler

“Then you have to let me help you, too. Even if it is just here when we are alone. You can’t carry everything yourself. You have to let me share the load.”

“Joyce, I am the king; it is my job to carry the load.”

“And apparently, I am queen or going to be, at least. So... so maybe the thing I can be good at is sharing the load?”

“But, why would you want to?” he was genuinely confused.

“Because it is you, Gareth,” she said plainly. “I have loved you since I was a kid. I care about you now. You are an incredible man, but you can’t do it alone. You are so busy protecting everyone else... who is protecting you?” Sung’s breath caught. She was incredible. He gaped for a minute, unable to find words to express to her how she had touched his heart. “Like the transforming thing,” she said, frowning. “Why did you not tell me the trouble you were having?”

“Because I did not want you to feel pressured.”

“But I didn’t even know it was a thing. Like, you could have told me that, and you were struggling without blaming me. You could have just told me so I could be aware and try to help you,” she swallowed. “That is what was happening when... when they interrupted when... when they interrupted us, right? When your eyes changed?”

“Yes,” he said. “I almost transformed. It was a close call.”

“Next time, tell me.”

He frowned. “Be honest, Joyce, what do you think you would have done if, just as we were about to have sex, I’d suddenly turned into a massive lion in the bed?”

She blinked and wallowed. “I am not saying it would not have been a shock.”

Sung’s laughter echoed off the stone roof above them. “Creator’s beard, woman, you amaze me.”

“Well, thank you. But I am serious, Sung. If we are going to do this together, you have to let me in and let me help you, as well as help me yourself. Promise me, please?”

His laughter died, and he squeezed her hand again. “I promise,” he said. Then, after a thoughtful silence. “Do you know no female has ever said that to me before?” he said quietly. “It has never even occurred to me that you would want to help me somehow.”

“You think it’s up to you to handle everything?”

Anima

“Yes!”

“Sung, you are not my dad.”

“Thank the creator for that!” he laughed, pulling her into a soul-searing kiss.

He woke in daylight; he could smell the warmth on the grass outside, though their room was still pitch black. He was delighted that his arms were still curled around Joyce, and she was snuggled into his chest. He stroked her back and her hair to wake her. She blinked and stretched, her breasts pressing against the wisp of a sleep shirt she wore. Sung swallowed hard but did not have much trouble fighting back to shift. The tonic was working.

“Good morning,” he said, his voice rough with sleep.

“Is it?” she asked, looking around. “It’s still so dark.”

“Give it a few seconds. The lights will come on soon.”

Sure enough, as he finished speaking, the first of the lanterns flared to life next to the door; one by one, all eight around the room flashed, then began to glow.

Joyce’s eyes went wide. “I wondered how they got lit each morning!”

“It is an idea we borrowed from the human world. We grind a manual generator in the city each morning, and it sends a current along the wires that ignite every light. Then they can be blown out at night when you wish.”

Joyce shook her head and smiled. “This place is amazing.”

Sung grinned. “It is why you fit so well,” his romantic gesture was interrupted by a sharp knock at the door. Joyce yelped, then realised she was dressed and rolled away from him in the furs. He rolled his eyes and stayed where he was. “Come in, Khloe,” he called, letting his voice trail into a growl at the end of her name.

The woman swung the door open and strode in, taking them in with a glance and sniffing the air. “Not healed enough yet? Then, you will need more of the tonic. Have you given it to him yet, Joyce?”

“I, uh, we just woke up -”

“You cannot leave it to wear off; it is too risky,” she picked up the bottle and spoon from the drawers in the corner and brought them over to Sung, pouring them as she stood next to the sleeping platform. “Open up, Gareth,” she sniggered.

Laurie Bowler

Sung groaned but did as he was told, swallowing both spoonfuls with a grimace, shaking his head, and then sitting up. The furs fell to his waist, baring him to the warm light. He sucked in his stomach and hoped Joyce noticed.

“How is your pain?” Khloe asked, peeling the bandages on his side and checking the wound. “You are healing nicely.”

“It still hurts when I move, but not as badly as it did last night,” he said, twisting his body slowly and raising his arm on that side. “I will be fine tomorrow.”

Joyce snorted. “Right, didn’t you say a rib was broken? That will take weeks.”

“Not in Anima,” Khloe and Sung both said simultaneously. Sung grinned.

Joyce’s mouth fell open. “Seriously?”

Sung nodded. Khloe checked his eyes, pressed on the rib until he winced and moved his arm in several circles.

“I think as long as you do not shift today, you will be fine tomorrow, as you said,” she said. Then, she sighed heavily, her shoulders sagging.

“Thank you, Khloe,” Sung said, touching her shoulder. “I am sorry you had to deal with that.”

“As you should be!” she snapped, coming to life, her eyes flashing.

Joyce’s mouth dropped open, but Sung knew Khloe was waiting to ensure he was okay before she tore him into strips. Since his mother passed away, she had taken the role of overseer in his life, and she took it seriously. His mother had been her best friend.

“I meant my apology, Mother,” Sung said softly, using her title and rubbing her upper arm. But she shook him off and began to pace the room.

“You cannot allow this to happen again, Sung! We have no idea how it affects you to be on the edge of the shift for so long, not to mention taking the tonic as an adult. I have never tested in for more than a single dose on anyone as mature as you!”

“I know.”

“I do not think you do. I tried to warn you at the rite, and you would not listen. The men have tried to warn you that you cannot simply change the laws of nature to suit your whims!”

“I know; Khloe, Joyce and I spoke last night.”

Anima

“Does Joyce know the histories? Can she tell you the chaos that occurred last time we had a human Queen? Can she teach you how to navigate the disapproval of the tribes?”

“No, I need you and the elders for that. I just meant....”

“You meant that, once again, you would simply make your way and hope for the best? Even though this puts your life at risk, not to mention Joyce’s? Are you listening, Sung? Or will you remain the mouse-brained cub, too proud of his newly-dropped balls to realise that he is risking lives and kingdoms?”

Sung slumped, hands in his lap and shoulders down. “I know, I do, and I will listen, Mother. I will, but we are here now. So, we must make the best of what’s come so far.”

“I hear words, you cuckold, but I do not see action. What I see is a king in his prime, reduced to half his strength because he was too stubborn to ask questions or tell anyone what he faced!”

He nodded. “You are right.”

“Of course, I am; I –”

“Wait just a damn minute!” Joyce snapped. “That is enough!” Sung’s eyes went wide, and he whipped his head around to look at her where she stood, just feet from Khloe, hands on her hips, glaring at the older woman, who was staring daggers back at her. “He has made a mistake, sure. And he needs to listen to what you know; we both do. So, you can correct him, even discipline him, but do not speak down to him! He is your king, and everything he has done has been either to help the people or me as well as he knew how. His heart is good. I don’t care what position you hold in the city, or the pride, or whatever, but do not humiliate my mate and force him to beg for your forgiveness when he does nothing but serve you, people!”

Khloe stalked over until she and Joyce were toe-to-toe, and Sung’s entire body went tense. Khloe topped Joyce by more than a head, but though Sung could smell the fear spike in Joyce, she did not back away.

“You think it is your place to tell me what to do with this man whom I have served and protected since he was a cub?” Khloe said in a low voice.

“Yes,” Joyce replied. “He is my mate. I would not see you or anyone else talk down to him like he is a child when he is the king.”

Laurie Bowler

“What about when he has been a very stubborn and stupid king?” Khloe said through her teeth.

Chapter Eleven

Hear the Queen

“Then I will make sure he knows it,” Joyce snapped back. “Just like he will tell me when I am wrong.”

Sung looked back and forth between them, his mouth open. He feared Khloe’s wrath; she could make things very difficult for Joyce if she chose to, but her courage to step between him and what she thought was an attack was nothing short of amazing. He would have to explain to her what Khloe’s role was in the pride and that she would never have spoken this way to him publicly. Well, at least, not quite so harshly.

He watched Khloe, uncertain how she would react to this show of strength from such an inexperienced mate. But after staring Joyce down for two more breaths, a slow smile bloomed on Khloe’s face. She turned to Sung and tipped her head at Joyce.

“I get it now,” she said with a wink. “Good luck, son. She has your mother’s spirit,” and she cackled laughter across the room as she packed her things. Sung suddenly felt very uneasy. “Joyce, well done. I am glad Sung will have someone at his side when the women’s council meets. He has always been far too lenient with us. After everything has... settled down, I will take you with me and introduce you. I can’t wait for you to meet Hunter,” she cackled again before patting Sung’s face. “Be careful today. Take the tonic at dinner, and for the creator’s sake, take your mate as soon as your body can.”

Sung raised an eyebrow at her. “Are you trying to say -”

“Oh, pfft. Don’t start,” the older female said, patting his cheek again. “I will come by this evening to make sure all is well before you... rest.”

Then she walked out.

Sung turned, smiling at Joyce, who stood in the same place, her mouth open, but confusion was written all over her face. He crawled out of the furs to walk over to her; he was careful of his ribs as he pulled her into his chest and kissed her hair.

“You are going to be the best Queen Anima has ever known,” he said into her hair.

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

She was unsure what she had expected out of this day, but it was not endless meetings and a house full of massive men. She sat by, quietly at first, when Erwin and the others arrived, assuming they would fill Sung in on something or get a decision from him. But the men settled down in the great room, Sung on one of the lounge chairs, and a new group would arrive every time a handful left.

She ran to get him drinks and food as he was able to throw them down between discussions, but in truth, she contributed nothing except to make sure his care was not forgotten. She was stunned at the variety and complexity of the issues he addressed confidently and, in most cases, with good humour. It was not until the middle of the afternoon when the security council arrived, all the older men, two or three from each tribe, from what she could tell. However, she was still struggling to pick out the herd animal tribes. Things became very serious very quickly. Each man stood before Sung and clapped a fistful hand across their chest, bowing their head and saying. "My loyalty to my king," as they entered.

Sung accepted their statements, but his face was severe when about fourteen or fifteen men had arrived; Sung looked around the room, then to Erwin.

"When are the wolves arriving?"

Joyce blinked and looked at the men. But he was right; none of them had the right build or that predatory air of the wolves. She swallowed hard. She had not thought about seeing them again. But of course, she would. And others like them.

"In an hour. The elders understand though they are not happy about it," Erwin replied.

Sung muttered something she could not quite catch, but his tone said it all. "I admit the events of last night closely touch my own life and heart, so I will submit to the council's judgement. But before Joyce tells you what she experienced, I ask you to consider her position as my mate and Queen of the Anima."

The men looked at each other and shifted. Sung's jaw twitched, but he did not say anything. One of the men Joyce thought was a bird stood up because of his long features and quick, sudden movements. "We, the elders, recognise the Queen; however, much of our people remain... uncertain," he said to Sung, then sat down again.

Anima

Sung muttered a curse and shifted in his seat. Was his pain increasing? But he just reached out a hand for her and pulled her to his side. “Joyce, please tell the men what happened last night in your own words. The events from the moment you left the market, please.”

She swallowed but turned to the men and kept her voice clear and firm like she had seen Sung doing all day. “I was walking out of the market in the opposite direction to everyone else, and it was jam-packed. Everyone was going to the reading...” she recounted all that had happened with the forest going quiet around her. The movements and shadows, the eyes, and the way the wolves disappeared and reappeared around her, so she could not be sure how many they were. Then she ran, and they stopped her before getting to the clearing. “They told me they were going to kill me,” she said.

Sung growled. “It was only by the creator’s grace that I was there in time,” he snarled. “I backhanded the female out of the air; she had launched her attack.”

The elders shook their heads and looked at each other, murmuring in their groups. Sung let them talk but took Joyce’s hand and stroked it with his thumb. She was glad for the contact; remembering how frightened she had been last night was more unsettling than expected.

They sat quietly, watching the others until the same man stood and faced them.

“We would like to hear from the Queen,” he intoned.

“She had already told you her story,” Sung said through his teeth.

The man nodded. “And yet, given her position, we want to know what she thinks we should do with the wolves?” All of the men nodded and turned to look at Joyce, who suddenly felt like a worm under the eyes of a flock of sparrows.

Sung growled in his chest.

Chapter Twelve

The Angry King

SUNG

Asking Joyce to make her judgement on the wolves that offended her was a power play. It allowed the elders to be seen to appease both him and Joyce, yet place any backlash from the people squarely on her shoulders rather than taking responsibility themselves.

How dare they? How dare they! Did Erwin know about this? He looked at his second but was reassured to find him looking off-balance and smelling even more so. So, the elders had come up with this on their own. Was it a ploy because they did not want to accept Joyce? Or were they genuinely afraid of making the wrong move in his eyes?

“Speak, Gerard,” he growled. “I gave this judgment to the elders so there could be no accusation of bias. Yet, you would give it back to the Queen?”

The man turned and bowed to him but did not meet his eyes. “Do not be offended, Majesty. We agree that the actions taken by young wolves were underhanded and dangerous. We will see them punished. But we understand the unrest in the people of Anima, and we wonder whether these young wolf cubs took it upon themselves to address an issue out of impatience or immaturity rather than bloodlust.”

“Does it make a difference?” Sung snarled, getting to his feet. “Are there any circumstances that a threat to the Queen is not seen as a threat to the throne and then to the entire community of Anima?”

“When the queen is not yet a queen in truth,” the man said bluntly, eyeing Sung. “Sire, you have our support, and we agree with you that time will answer these... questions. However, we cannot fault the people for being confused and the young for challenging boundaries. No one knows how to navigate the current state of affairs.”

Sung’s back prickled, and he reminded himself it was almost time for the tonic. His healing was progressing well; he could not afford to shift now. But he also could not show weakness in front of men now. He stalked over to where the man stood, speaking to him but letting his eyes fall on each man individually so they knew he had not forgotten them.

Anima

“This, again? How many times, Gerard? You say you support me, you understand, and your years of wisdom agree that time will heal this. And yet... here we are... a question of treason before you, an accusation of murder attempted against the queen herself, and you raise the questions of the people again? Let me ask you, what if the attempt had been on my life?”

The men all shifted in their seats. Gerard’s face fell. “Sire, you must know we would not stand for any attempt on your life!”

“Then why would you even stomach an attempt on my queen?” he roared. The men leapt to their feet, only to drop to one knee, hands to their chests. Sung snarled. “I am not asking for your offerings; you have served me and this kingdom well. I have no question about your loyalty to me; I ask you to show your loyalty to her!”

“But... sire... if she does not take you. Or if you do not proceed -”

“You think me fickle and cold-hearted that I would simply discard her?” he asked, genuinely shocked.

“No,” the deep voice came from the equine corner behind him, near Erwin. Sung turned to meet the eyes of Brant, the eldest of the elders. “No one questions your character or intentions, Sung,” he said slowly. “Only your queens. We do not know her, not her heart or character, nor do we know her intentions. And to add to this, she comes from another world. Her customs are different. We cannot be expected to anticipate her motives.”

“And my testimony to her heart and motives are not enough for you?”

“Forgive me, Sire, but all of us have been... blinded by lust at times. We would not fault you for it, having walked through it ourselves. But we also cannot deny that it occurs.”

“You think that I -” Sung began but cut off when her voice rose from the far corner of the room, closing his eyes and throwing up a prayer for mercy.

“Why don’t you ask me?” she said quietly but firmly.

All the men gasped and turned to look at her. Unless invited to do so, Anima females did not speak in the male council, just as males did not talk in the female council.

The men all turned to Sung, who was left with no choice.

Laurie Bowler

“Wife,” he said through his teeth. “Would you take the vow and pledge honesty to the men seated here? Explain answers to their questions, and offer any information, complimentary or not, to soothe their fears?”

“Yes, I would,” she said simply. Of course, she had no idea the grilling she was about to receive. And to save her before these men, he could not soften their approach. He would have to let them have free rein, or they would not believe her.

“Very well, please come to the floor.”

She got up uncertainly but walked quickly over to join him. He took her hand and led her to a seat in the centre where they could all see and scent her easily.

“Very well, gentleman, ask your questions.”

Chapter Thirteen

Undercurrents

JOYCE

She'd had no clue! The personal nature... the digging these men would do! When one of them asked if she was a true virgin or perhaps trying to hide her previous activity from Sung, she looked at him, wondering if he would fly into a rage. But he had gritted his teeth and nodded at her to answer the question.

"No, of course not. I am not... in my world, it is not a matter of shame if you are not a virgin when you marry."

The men laughed. "Neither, here, Sire. But a sacrifice must be pure. Did you perhaps discover that your mating would be rejected if you were not and wish to hide that for as long as possible?"

"No! If I had not been what... what they said I was, I would have just said so," the men looked at each other as if they were unsure whether to believe her. "Oh, for the love of – ask me!"

"Ask you what, Sire?"

"Ask me why we have not mated yet!"

Erwin, who suddenly seemed to be hiding a smile, turned to her and asked the question. "Lady Joyce, why have you not yet offered yourself to your husband?"

"Because I did not know I was supposed to," she spat. "Sung and I were... very comfortable together that first night. I thought that where I come from, it is natural that whoever has the most experience would take the first step to... bringing you together. When he waited, I thought he did not want to mate with me. I was upset about it. But I had no idea others would know. And I did not know that mating would be a topic of conversation throughout the entire people! Then the next night, when we were together, we were... interrupted."

Erwin nodded. "It is true. When we entered to tell the king about the silent one, they were together and... engaged with each other."

Joyce stared at him, and she thought he might have blushed. She knew she did.

Laurie Bowler

“Then I was gone until last night when I was injured,” Sung said, though technically, he should not have spoken into her testimony. “So, you see, my friends, there is no plot or ploy. Only the misunderstanding of two people new to each other and the creator’s sense of humour keeping us apart.”

“What I would like to know,” Joyce ground out. “Is what this has to do with the wolves attacking me?”

The man Sung had called Gerard spoke up then. “The wolf tribe is, to Anima, the human equivalent of our assassins,” he said carefully. “If we were to find out, they had good reason to threaten... they would be forgiven for overstepping.”

“Overstepping?” Sung snarled. “That is what you are calling it?”

‘Not anymore,’ the deep voice said from the corner again. Joyce turned to look at the man, who was the oldest in the room. “I believe the lady has been honest with us; we should move ahead with our counsel. I propose a vote to discipline the young wolves to one month in the camps, and if Erwin discovers a plot that the elders were in any way involved, death to any who declared her the enemy.”

Joyce blinked, surprised. But the men took only seconds to shrug their shoulders and agree. In less than a minute, Sung had relaxed.

“Thank you, sirs,” he said, though the tension in his jaw had not relaxed. “I am glad we could finally get to the bottom of this....”

And just like that, it was done.

Joyce wished that was the last time her sex life would be discussed publicly. Sung squeezed her hand as she walked past to greet the women coming in the door with dinner for everyone, and she squeezed back.

But she felt like she had been wrung out. The meetings dragged on most of the day and late into the night, so Joyce went to bed without Sung feeling exhausted.

Chapter Fourteen

Under pressure

SUNG

Sung woke hours before dawn, his nose full of her scent and his body aching to join her. He had dragged himself into the furs well after the high moon. Joyce had left the meetings hours earlier and was soundly asleep when he arrived. His only comfort had been that she had chosen his furs to sleep in. He had slipped between them into the warm pocket she had created and wrapped himself around her. But she had not woken nor spoken, and he had fallen asleep immediately.

But now... now he was awake. Very firmly awake.

Joyce lay with her back to him, her hair scattered over the pillow and her face. Her shoulder pressed up and out of the furs and the wide neck of her sleep shirt. The bare skin was an invitation he could not turn down. He shifted closer to her, noting how much better his ribs felt and thanking the creator for the Anima blood that allowed him to heal so quickly. He had seen how long the human body took to heal itself. It worried him if Joyce had any serious wounds.

Pushing the dark thoughts away, he pressed himself against her back and pulled her hair back off her neck and cheek so her skin was bare. Then he set his mouth right where her shoulder met her neck, laving it with his tongue, humming his approval at her warm scent. Then she stretched, and he let his hand slide down the inside of her arm to her breast, which he cupped as he continued to explore her neck and shoulder with his lips and tongue. She came awake slowly, her eyes fluttering.

Her breath came more quickly, and she leaned back into his chest.

"Is it morning?" she rasped.

"Not yet," he said against her skin.

Her hand slid down to where he cupped her breast, and he thought she might remove it. But after a moment, she only pressed his hand harder. Sung's breath sped up. His arousal was plain, but he did not want to frighten her.

Laurie Bowler

"You were incredible last night," he whispered in her ear, then nipped her earlobe. She shivered, and goosebumps pebbled the skin on her neck and back. "I like seeing you... defiant."

"Sung?"

"Yes?"

"I waited for you last night."

"I know, I am sorry, I had missed so many -"

"Sung?"

"Yes?"

"Shut up and kiss me," she rolled over to face him, and with a purr of desire, he pulled her in, but she was already there, kissing, her tongue against his, her hands all over his back and shoulders. She seemed frantic, and Sung was surprised. She had been asleep just a second before. Had she had a dream?

Then she arched against him and gasped. "Please, Sung!" But her scent held more fear than desire, and he pulled away to search her eyes, which flew open as soon as he stopped kissing her.

"What is wrong?" he said, trying to calm his breathing.

"Nothing? Why?"

"You are afraid of something. What is it?" To his shock, her face crumpled, and she buried it in her hands, her shoulders shaking with tears that he'd had no warning were coming. "Joyce, love, what is it?" he was alarmed. Had she been hurt? Had she had a nightmare? He stroked her hair and back and crooned to her, pulling her into his chest, but she only sobbed harder. "Sweet girl, please. What is wrong?"

"They killed the romance!" she cried, and if his hearing was not so sharp, he would have thought he had misheard her.

"What? Who?"

"Those – those men. With all their questions and... like this is some kind of plot or plan. Like I am trying to trap you and Khloe with all her instructions. I can't... we need to just get this over with so they will all stop talking about it, and then maybe we can enjoy it!" She buried her face in his chest and clung to him.

Anima

Cursing himself for an insensitive fool, Sung held her, stroking her until she calmed. When the tears finally eased, and she pulled back far enough that he could see her eyes puffy and still shining with unshed tears, he sighed.

“Do not worry about them. Any of them,” he said, stroking her hair off her face. “Do not worry about the timing. They will all survive a few more days, weeks even!”

“Sung, don’t be ridiculous. You have entire tribes working on assassination attempts just because we have not done the dirty; we need to get it done!” she tried to pull him in, but he stopped her.

“No, Joyce. I would not do that, and I would not let you do that. This is between us. I promise it will stop being their business the day it happens. They will stop caring.”

“They care now!”

“Only because they do not understand it. I know it is frustrating, but I promise you... we can take our time. Our own time. I will handle the critics until then.”

“But you shouldn’t have to! It is so unfair!”

Sung rolled over onto his back so his most insistent body part could stop being brushed by her legs and making the argument for her. He pulled her into his side and sighed, raking his free hand through his hair. “No, you are right. It is not fair. But... life is not fair. So, for now, my people are confused, and some are angry. But when the time comes, they will get over it. Until then, I will deal with it. None of that means that you have to rush into anything.”

“But -”

“No, Joyce, I will not be moved on this,” he had not meant to make it an order, but he knew it sounded like one. She went very still in his arms, and he sighed again. “How about we get our minds off this and... Are you hungry?”

“Not really,” she sighed. Sung frowned. “What I want is a shower. I miss showers.”

He turned his head. “Did anyone not show you the bathing pools?”

She shuddered. “Yes, but... I am not going to go have a bath with all those people!” her voice got so high it was almost a squeak.

Sung smiled. “No, I meant my bathing pools.”

She blinked. “No.”

Laurie Bowler

His grin broadened, and he pushed the furs back, leaping out of bed. "Come on then, I have just the thing."

Chapter Fifteen

The bathing pools

SUNG

He took her hand to lead her through the dark when she was out of the furs.

“I did not think to check if anyone had shown you this,” he said, smiling, “but I will admit, I am kind of glad I get to do it.”

She was still in the sleep shirt she had found. It was sleeveless and hung almost to her knees. But she had not noticed the laces at the front had come untied during the night. Sung turned away and focused on... something other than the view.

He led her out of the bedroom and through the great room opposite the front door. Behind the space he used for cooking, there was another natural curve in the wall. He kept a door on it because the wind howled through in the winter. Pushing the door open, he prayed the moon was out enough that she could see and he would not have to light the lanterns. Her gasp of surprise was answered enough as he led her through to the oval-shaped space that was entirely private with high rock walls and a thin but very tall waterfall bubbling and splashing at the end. He had always loved the bathing pools but suddenly realised they would be much more fun with a mate.

Steam rose in the air over the two pools, so close together that their edges lapped and made them look like a figure eight. In truth, one was as dark and deep as the sea and much cooler because the above-ground waterfall emptied into it. The other was only waist deep, with slick mud squished between your toes and hot from the volcanic vents underneath. His father had taken the time to have benches carved out of the rocks under each surface, and he prayed a blessing over the man as he led Joyce towards the hot pool first.

“My advice,” he said, picking his way across the slick rocks and holding her hand to make sure she did not fall, “is to start in hot water. And when you start to sweat, jump into the cooler pool and rinse off. It is a shock, but it wakes your whole body up. And Khloe said it has some good health properties, though I could not tell you what that would be -” Her tug on his hand stopped him, and he turned quickly. But she was smiling, staring straight up where the moon and stars

Laurie Bowler

were visible at the top of the hundred-foot drop to where they stood. Sung looked up and smiled, too. Then back down to her. "One of my favourite views," he said, staring at her wide smile.

"Sung, it's beautiful," she looked at him then. "Thank you, you are right. This is much better than... than rushing... things."

He could not deny his disappointment that things would not be rushed. But he nodded, happy that her tears were gone, replaced with that beaming smile.

"We have as much time as you need, my love," he said, then swept a hand towards the pools. "And in the meantime, we will get you very clean!"

She laughed and followed him towards the warm mineral pool. Sung waded to the other side of the pool. He kept his back turned so she could take off her sleep shirt and get into the water without his eyes on her. However, his body tightened, knowing what was happening behind him while waiting.

When he heard the water ripple as she stepped in and imagined the water swallowing up her thighs, stomach, and breasts... he groaned.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her voice echoing in the rocky chamber.

"I am fine."

"You can turn around now."

He turned with his eyes just above water level, intending to find her face, expecting her to sit.

Instead, he found her thighs deliciously white in the moonlight. He blinked, then yanked his eyes to her face. She was blushing; he could smell the blood pooling under her cheeks, but her smile was bright, and she did not cover herself.

"I need to get used to this, right?" she said, then ruined the effect by swallowing and looking down at herself.

She stood on the bench, so the water only covered her knees. Sung waded across, not taking his eyes off hers, though dear creator above, he could see every curve and dimple. He was on the slit floor of the mineral pool, so he lifted her at her ribs, sliding her down his body until she stood with him, the water covering her well above her waist. Then he cupped her face with his hands and kissed her long and slow, dipping and tasting, trying desperately to keep her focus

Anima

on him and his touch, nothing else. Her hands splayed on his back when they finally broke apart, and she was breathless.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured against her jaw. She tipped her head back to give him access to her neck again, and he growled his approval.

“Sung,” she whispered as he kissed his way down the column of her neck. “I think out of the two of us, you are the one who qualifies for ‘beautiful’, oh!” she gasped as he nipped the skin under her ear, then kissed it to soothe. Goosebumps rose under his tongue, and her nipples hardened against his stomach. His breath began to rasp. He let one hand slide down to her breast, paling its weight, then slid his thumb over the tender point so her breath caught.

“Joyce,” he groaned, kissing her deeper, pulling her in.

She came willingly, one hand cupping his neck to pull him down for her kiss, the other sliding up his side, her fingers playing along his muscles like the keys on a piano. Then she dropped her chin to kiss his chest, right in the centre, over his heart.

“You are mine,” she whispered against his skin. “I do not care what they say or what they think. You belong to me.”

Sung roared his agreement.

Chapter Sixteen

Waited for you

JOYCE

Joyce had kissed men before. She had even engaged in other... activities occasionally. But the truth was, she had never truly wanted a man before. She had always felt slightly afraid or, on one occasion, downright bored. Being in Sung's arms, she forgot all of that. It was as if his touch lit fireworks under her skin, little points of light and heat that sparkled and trailed to fade away long after his fingers had moved on.

He made her feel alive. The warmth of the water, the gentle hiss of the waterfall in the next pool, and the echo of the rocks... all felt like a cocoon of love and heat.

She wanted more.

But, remembering that Sung was so intent on her being the one to choose, she did not know how to show him. So, as his breathing got heavier, and his hands began to shake as they danced in all the places she had always tried to hide, she found a pressure building inside her, low in her belly. It made her want to do more. It made her feel hollow inside.

It made her feel like he was the only one to soothe the ache. Then he began walking her slowly back to the pool's edge.

"Sung..." his name was gravel in her throat.

He pulled away just far enough to meet her gaze, his hair falling into his eyes. He peered at her through it like he had that first night when she had compared him to the lion in the grass, without any idea how appropriate the metaphor was.

"Yes?" he rasped, his fingers curling to cup her neck, his thumb stroking her jaw.

"I want you," she said breathlessly. "I don't care about what anyone else thinks. I just... want you."

He blew out a breath and dropped his forehead to hers, his eyes squeezed shut like he was in pain. "Is your side hurting?" she gasped, pulling away. She had forgotten about that.

"No," he breathed, keeping his arms in an iron cage around her. "I am just trying to remind myself of all ways you have been pressured by every damn Anima -"

Anima

“No, Sung. That is not what I mean. Look at me,” he opened his warm brown eyes that looked black in the moonlight and stared into hers. “I want you whether it matters to anyone else or not. I want you now. Today, I have been waiting for you all this time. I don’t want to wait anymore.”

He huffed. “It has been a week. The elders are just being stubborn. It is not unreasonable -”

“No, Sung, you’re not listening. I have been waiting for you. I didn’t even know it until now, but I have had choices before. I have had men who wanted to be with me. And it never felt right... this -” she put her hand on his chest. “This feels right. I want this; I want you.”

A shudder rocked through him as she went up on her tiptoes, pulling him down and tilting her head to bring their mouths together, open and gasping, her tongue searching for his. Then, when he still did not move except to kiss her, she moved her hand down his chest, his stomach, low, to the place where she could feel his arousal, like velvet-covered steel, nudging at her belly.

But before she had even reached for him, he caught her hand and rasped. “No, no, not... not now, Joyce. I want to do this right, and that... that might not help.”

She frowned, but he grinned, pulling away suddenly to kneel and pick her up. She yelled and threw her arms around his neck, but he carried her to his chest as he waded through the rest of the pool, stepped up on the bench, and went out completely, trailing water in his wake.

“My shirt!” she squeaked, clinging to him as he walked.

“I will get it later,” he growled, kissing her as he carried her out of the moonlit chamber and back into the cave.

She giggled and pulled his hair back off his neck as he walked her into the great room, then opened her mouth against the cord of muscle at his neck and sucked. Sung groaned and stopped, cursing, to sit her on a side table against the rock wall, bracing one hand against it as his entire body trembled.

“Light!” he croaked. “Do that again.”

With a soft laugh, she let her tongue follow the proud tendon on his thick neck, then kissed the hollow at his throat. He groaned, his fingers tight in her hair, shaking.

“You like that?” she whispered against his jaw.

Laurie Bowler

“Joyce,” he rasped. “Fuck.”

“That is the goal,” she giggled.

He took her mouth then, desperate and wild, strange noises in his throat that called for her, his hands pulling her legs around his waist so when he rolled his hips, it brought them skin-to-skin in ways that made Joyce pant. She clung to his back and held on tightly as he trembled and shook, kissed the side of his neck as he pressed against her, threatening to take her at any moment. His slide against her made that pressure build even higher until she gasped, too. He kissed her again, and she clawed a hand into his hair, desperate to be closer, always closer.

“Sung,” she gasped as the hardest part of him slid against the softest parts of her. And even though it twisted her stomach into a spiral of desire, it was not enough. “Sung, please!”

“Light, Joyce, are you certain?”

“Yes!”

With a growl of frustration, he leaned in, cupped her bottom with both hands and lifted her to carry her through the rest of the cave and into the bedroom.

Taken off guard, she grabbed at his shoulders. “What I thought....”

“I am not screwing you against a wall on your first time,” he muttered through his teeth, then kissed away her protest.

“But we can try it another time, right?”

His eyes lit up. “Start a list,” he growled, shouldering the bedroom door open, then kicking it closed behind them and tumbling her onto the sleeping platform as she laughed.

Chapter Seventeen

First Time for Everything

SUNG

Restraint had never really been an issue for him, but she wound him so tight that he felt like he would explode when he entered her. He needed a moment to get himself back under control. So, when he tumbled her back, he regained his control. He did not follow immediately when he tumbled her back onto the furs, and she laughed. Instead, he stood back to look at her, sprawled there, her hands reaching for him, a beaming smile on her face.

“Come here, beautiful,” she giggled.

He snorted. “We will discuss that later,” he growled.

He let his fingers trail so lightly up the side of her leg that she shivered, and her knees fell open. His chest rose and fell like a bellow, giving away his increasing need. He could not quite believe this was happening. Joyce was here in Anima forever, and she was his.

Thank the creator.

“Sung,” she pushed herself up on her elbows. “Why are you not coming up here?”

“Because I need to remember this,” he said hoarsely. “I have wanted this for so long... I thought about this, dreamt about it. Joyce... you have no idea...”

Her face went serious, and she pushed herself up to kneel in front of him, one hand on his chest, the other on his shoulder, her breasts bouncing as she straightened.

“Sung... this is our life now. We can have this whenever we want. You do not have to... this does not have to be perfect. If we get it wrong, we will try again. If I do not like something, I will tell you. Stop overthinking and just... show me, please.”

He pulled her into a searing kiss; how had she reassured him then? Then, still kissing her, crawled up onto the platform with her, leaning her back until she lay flat and he covered her completely. The mating call huffed in his throat without his will. But she sighed and clawed her fingers into his hair, kissing him, frantic for all the right reasons this time. He cupped her thigh, then dragged his hand slowly up her leg, hooking her knee up and over his hip as he rolled against her again, seeking that perfect slide that had made her mouth drop open last time.

Laurie Bowler

Listening carefully to what made her breath catch and cry, he stroked, kissed, and thumbed until she was panting and her hips writhed. Deep in his chest, something came alight inside him as he nudged at her. She shuddered and gasped, her hand slapping his back when she clung.

“This will hurt,” he gasped through his teeth. “I am so sorry, but I can’t stop it.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay!”

“But it will ease with time, love, I promise.”

“Sung, please!”

With one long, shuddering thrust, he entered her, expecting to take his time to work his way to the barrier. But she was so ready and open to him that he slid to the hilt, crying her name as she gasped and became his. She tensed around him and under him, and he froze, trembling. Breath heaving, he waited, one hand cupped over her head, the other holding her leg.

“Joyce?” his voice shook.

“I am fine,” she whispered. “Just... just give me a minute.”

“I am so sorry, my -”

“Sung, I swear I will never sleep with you again if you apologise to me one more time.”

He snapped his mouth closed, and she laughed, and it squeezed her around him so beautifully that he almost lost the shred of control he had left. He groaned and dropped his head to her shoulder, inhaling deeply as that warmth in his chest spiralled out, twisting together with her scent and the pounding of his pulse and snapping a lock on his heart that he could feel. It was as if the shape of her under him, the warmth of her hands on his skin, and the whisper of her voice were the keys, and only he could open it.

Sung shook, and his breath caught,

“Are you okay?” Joyce asked in a small voice.

“Yes, yes... I just... I love you, Joyce,” he breathed. “I love you.”

Anima

JOYCE

She had been crawling the heights of that pressure inside that had built with every slide of him against her and every touch of his hand. She gasped his name and rocked against him, pleading. She had made noises she had never heard and grabbed at him, desperate, begging him! When he finally plunged inside her, for a moment, it was as if he had come home to her, as if she had found the place she was always supposed to be. Her head rolled back, and her mouth dropped open with the joy of it.

The pain stabbed deep inside like a cold water shock on a hot day, and she froze. Sung stilled immediately, though with a shudder that told her he had struggled. She could think again. She was more than just a bundle of nerves. She was aware, aware of the pain. But also aware of him, desperately.

He was... everywhere, over her, inside her, around her, his skin was her blanket and his hand her comfort, his breath in her ear called her name.

"Joyce?" his voice trembled.

"I am fine, just... just give me a minute."

"I am so sorry, my -"

"Sung, if you apologise to me one more time, I swear I will never sleep with you again," she snapped, then laughed when he closed his mouth so quickly his teeth clicked.

Her laughing made her... feel him. Inside, she was awed, suddenly so awed that they were as close as two people could be. She bore down on those muscles again, experimenting, and Sung groaned, burying his face in her shoulder and taking a deep breath. Something was happening; she could feel it. Something rolled around inside him, and he shook to contain it, his breath catching like he was in pain.

"Are you okay?" Joyce asked, slightly afraid that making him stop may have harmed him. But he lifted his head, and though she could not see the colour in his eyes, she saw them shine.

"Yes, yes... I just... I love you, Joyce," he breathed. "I love you."

Whatever had been inside of him hit her right in the chest. An embrace to her heart that stole her breath and overwhelmed her with emotion. She took his face in her hands as her heart

Laurie Bowler

lit up like one of those lanterns in the forest, glowing with warmth and light, and it eased out of her to envelop him.

“Oh. Sung,” she gasped. “I love you, too. I think I always have.”

She kissed him then, and his breath shuddered across her lips.

Chapter Eighteen

Mated

The pain she had felt had eased, and as she pulled him in, he groaned, moving ever so slightly inside her, giving her that tingling firework touch of his both inside and out. He tried to hold back, but she kissed him again and whispered in his ear.

“Do not stop,” she rolled her lips as he filled her.

He braced himself on the furs, his eyes locked with hers and burning with intensity, and thrust once, slowly. Her head fell back.

“Is that a yes, Joyce?”

“Yes...” she bit her lip slowly as he did it. “Don’t... stop...”

With an animal moan, he came alive with his hands trailing from her neck to her breasts, sides, and legs as he continued to roll into her, breathing her name against her skin and clinging at the peak of each thrust.

“Sung!”

“Hold on, my love,” he sighed, his massive bicep curled next to her head as the other hand stroked up the back of her thigh, then over her knee, and back up to reach between them. “Hold on to me,” he began to play her body like a musical instrument, rolling his hips in time with the slide of his thumb, tongue, and gasp of her name. Joyce clung to his arm and neck, cries she could not stop breaking in her throat at the park of each thrust.

“Mine,” he whispered savagely against her neck as she threw her head back, her breath tearing out of her throat. “My mate, my wife, only mine.”

Joyce began to tremble, whimpering as she sensed a peak to this tingling wave she had been riding, but each gasp left her breathless only until Sung began hissing between his teeth and slid his hand down behind her hip to pull her up in the exact moment he thrust.

The world zoomed in to a pinpoint of time-space, only where their skins met, as the warmth and light that bound them together suddenly snapped into place, tying their souls. Then the wave crashed over her, and Joyce shouted his name, arching into him as he roared his release and his love for her. A few seconds later, they both collapsed. Sung was careful to brace his own

Laurie Bowler

weight on his elbows so he would not crush her, but his shoulder heaving with his breath, and Joyce trembling and gasping but boneless content.

Anima

SUNG

She had just become his world. As he struggled to catch his breath, to find himself again in this body of tingling nerves and rushing emotion, he could not hold any thought beyond her.

Joyce, Joyce, Joyce.

There was no other name on earth that meant more. And no other female alive would satisfy his body, heart or soul.

The mating bond.

He'd had no idea.

Even as he lay there, gasping for air, his face buried in her neck, he wanted her again. This was going to be a problem.

"Sung," she rasped. "Was that?"

"The mating bond," he croaked between breaths.

"Is this like that for everyone?"

"No," he spluttered, his chest still heaving. He did not roll off her but leaned to the side, taking his weight so he could take her hand and put it to his chest, over his heart. "Can you feel that? Feel it pounding?"

"Yes."

"You did that, Joyce. No one else, only you."

She turned her head and kissed him slowly, deeply, her breath still heavy. Then, when she pulled back, she was grinning like a cat who got the cream.

"What?"

"How soon until we can do it again?"

He chuckled, but it pushed him deeper into her, and they both sucked in.

"I am not sure," he said, smiling slowly. "But we are going to find out."

He could not resist it; he took her back to the pools. At first, it was to let her wash and soak; she would be sore later. At least this time, he remembered towels. They sat in the mineral pool for a long time, always touching but in innocent ways, thighs brushing as they sat close, fingers twined under the water. But Sung's body tightened as it warmed to a flush, and she

Laurie Bowler

wanted to try the colder water. She climbed out of the bench seat in the hot pool and trotted the few feet over to the cold, dipping her toe in, then squeaking.

“It is so cold!”

“It is not really,” he said, still sitting in the mineral pool. “It just feels that way because of the heat.”

She was still a little self-conscious about walking around naked, but whenever she started to cover herself, he would say her name and let her see the beauty in his eyes.

Not brave enough to jump in, she skirted the pool's edge, walking out of the shadowed ledge where the waterfall pattered from high in the mountain wall. He smiled, watching her tentatively step under the falling water, hissing and squealing at first because of the shock of the cold on her pink skin.

But she kept at it until she stood under the sheet of it, her hands clasped at her chest to hold onto warmth. She looked at him over her shoulder, giggling and puffing with the cold.

“Come on, Sung. Come warm me up,” she said and winked at him.

With a grunt, Sung pushed himself up and out of the warm water. He was already hard, but the cold douse might slow things down. Which probably was not a bad thing. The mating bond was driving him closer to her, and it was becoming difficult not to simply throw her over his shoulder and take her back to bed. Instead, he walked towards the waterfall, letting himself drink in the sight of her curved back and buttocks as she shivered under the cool water.

But, seeing him coming, she turned and stretched her arms to wet her hair, dropping her head back under the waterfall. The combined sight of her white throat, completely bared, and her breasts pressed upward, stiff and tight because of the cold, shocked his system, so potent, he almost stumbled.

The mating call huffed in his throat, the deep harshness of it resonating off the stone walls. She heard and recognised it, lifting her head to look at him. Seeing the desire burning in his eyes, her grin shifted to a knowing smile. Eyes still locked on him, she returned to stretching under the water, sliding her hands through her hair and shivering under the stream. When he was only a few feet away, he stopped to take her in, and she let her hands trail down over her wet breasts.

Anima

"I am cold, Sung," she said, her voice rough and tight.

"I will see what I can do," he said hoarsely.

Sung covered the last few steps between them in a flash, taking her into his arms and bending her backwards to taste her throat. He let the water bounce off his shoulders and back to shelter her from the chill of it. She laughed, but it quickly became a sigh as he held her against him and let his hands rove. His breath was already heavy when she took his face in her hands and kissed him open-mouthed, but then he slid one hand to her breast, letting his fingertips trail over the fierce point of her nipple.

She gasped, and her knees wobbled. He swept her up, lifting her so they were face to face, guiding her to wrap her legs around his waist. Arms around his neck, she pulled back to smile as he started walking her back to the warm pool.

"I wish I could take you back to my old life," she whispered, combing the hair off his face with one hand.

Sung frowned. "You do not like Anima?"

"No, it is not that! I just meant... all my friends would be so jealous. You are smoking hot. They would not believe me unless they saw you in the flesh."

Sung dropped his head back and laughed, and she kissed his throat again, which turned his laughter into a groan.

One hand supporting her weight, the other sliding up her back, under her hair, he stopped walking to kiss her properly, his breath rasping, getting faster. Hers did, too, thundering in his ear as she gasped and kissed and whispered his name, beginning to roll her hips against him in a way that threatened to bring him to his limit far too quickly.

He had intended to take her back to the bedroom after she had soaked. Still, her urgency matched him, so he considered and dismissed several options as she kissed along his jaw. She was too new to this for him to get too adventurous. They had plenty of time for that.

"What are you doing?" she whispered when he hesitated.

"Making a list," he muttered, and she laughed. Then he spied the towels he had thrown alongside the pools, intending to wrap her and dry her so he could watch her skin blush. "Hold on," he grunted, then hissed when she nipped his earlobe. "If you want this to last, you will keep

Laurie Bowler

your teeth to yourself," he growled, holding her chin as he kissed her deeply, the call pressing out of his throat again.

"Sung..."

"I have got you, kitten," he whispered, lowering himself to the thick towels until she sat in his lap and clung to him, arching her chest into his so her nipples were teased. She groaned and buried her fingers in his hair to pull him in as he opened his mouth on her shoulder, kissing and sucking the skin at her collarbone.

She writhed against him, her body seeking the mating again, and Sung gritted his teeth, stunned by the urgency; that was how desperate he felt for her. Determined to make this less of a frantic coupling, he cupped his hand behind her head, kissing her deeply, slowing the pace of both the kiss and their rolling. At first, she fought him, whimpering, but he sighed her name repeatedly until she dropped her head back, leaning away, bringing herself in deeper contact with him.

They both groaned.

She had found the spot, and her mouth dropped open as she slowly rolled her hips, pressing against him. Yanking his leash tight, Sung splayed his hand at her back to give her some resistance, and her breath stuttered as she climbed toward release.

"That is my girl," he whispered. He let his teeth drag down the line of her throat as he brought his other hand between them. At first, the shift made her whimper, but when he added his thumb, sliding from her deepest core to the point of her pleasure, she cried out.

"Don't stop!" her voice was high and desperate.

"I won't, kitten, I won't. Creator's light, you are beautiful."

"Sung!"

"I am here. I will always be here."

She went rigid, arched back, mouth open in a silent scream as her fingers dug into his shoulders. She sobbed her release, and Sung growled his approval, his breath rasping. He was so close, so close, and he had not even taken her yet.

Then she jerked back into him, her face in his neck, gasping, kissing him, her hands everywhere, her body rippling and liquid under his palms. He stared at her in awe as his body

Anima

tensed, sensing what was to come. When she opened her eyes and sat up, her cheeks were flushed. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

“That is wonderful,” she said breathlessly, her hands stroking his neck as they continued to roll together. She twitched at each peak from the added sensitivity of her climax. “But it is not enough. I want you, Sung. I want you inside me, please.”

With a heated snarl, he leaned her back, laying her down on the towel, covering her with his body.

“I am not going to last long,” he warned her, positioning himself with a shaking hand.

“I do not care.”

He invaded her mouth with his tongue the moment he took her body. She cried his name, already shivering, climbing towards her next peak as he thrust repeatedly. She clung to him and held him tightly while crying out her love and need for him. Every word out of her mouth pushed him further and closer to his climax until he threw his head back and roared his love and claim of her. Her – his perfect mate.

The roar echoed up through the cavernous mountainside toward the sky that was now beginning to pink. Far away, across the city, voices rose; howls, calls, screeches, and brays broke through the dawn light in answer to their king.

Oh, shit, Sung thought as he sagged over her, his breath still coming in gasps.

Completely unaware of their audience, Joyce took his face in her hands and kissed him, her breath coming short and sharp.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit,” Sung muttered hoarsely, cursing himself over and over for forgetting where they were and that his roar would be heard by the people.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, suddenly still.

“Oh, nothing, sweetheart,” he sighed, stroking her arm as he leaned his temple on his fist to take his weight. “Just stupid, alpha-male bullshit,” he grinned.

“Well, if this is a part of that, I have decided I am a fan,” she said breathlessly.

Sung kissed her again, then led her back to the pool for another soak.

Chapter Nineteen

Long Live the Queen

JOYCE

They made love again in the furs, then dozed for an hour. Joyce woke, her chest bursting with happiness and her body sore but tingling for more. She rolled over happily to find Sung lying with one arm under his head, staring at the ceiling. The lanterns were on, and they bathed his skin in a warm glow that made her want to lick him. But she forced herself not to start anything. Instead, she rested her head on his arm and threw her arm over his chest.

He turned his head and kissed her lightly.

“Good morning.”

“It is the best morning ever,” she said, smiling.

He raised one eyebrow and gave a lopsided grin. “Is that right, Queen Joyce?”

She snorted. “I am no more a Queen now than I was twelve hours ago.”

“No less, But tell that to my people,” he grumbled.

Then it hit her after everything they said; she had not thought it through.

“They will know,” she whispered in horror, her cheeks burning bright with embarrassment.

Sung groaned. “Yes, they will.”

Joyce rolled onto her back and covered her face with her hands. “This is so embarrassing!”

Frowning, Sung rolled and leaned over her, pulling her hands away from her face.

“Embarrassing? You are embarrassed that you own the king in body, heart, and soul?”

“No, I am embarrassed that I am going to walk out today, and everyone will know what we have been doing.”

“Why? They see no shame in it.”

“Yes, but... it is private.”

Sung huffed. “Not in Anima.”

Anima

She groaned again and pulled a pillow over her face. He took a lot of time coaxing it away from her and reminding her why she should never be embarrassed. And by the time he had, she was so alight and relaxed that she decided she didn't care if they knew.

After all, she had married up. If anyone should be embarrassed, it should be Sung. Sung had been in no hurry to leave the cave. And in truth, Joyce was not either. But she wanted to get this first encounter over with it. If everyone was going to be talking about their mating, let them get it out of the way so she could get past the embarrassment and get on with her new life.

She insisted they go to breakfast. Sung reluctantly agreed. But he dragged his feet.

"What's wrong?" she said after the third time he found a reason to dart back to the bedroom before they left. "Is it going to be bad out there?"

"You will be fine," he muttered and took her hand, kissing her knuckles as they walked through the door.

It was not until later that she realised he had not mentioned himself.

As soon as they stepped out of the cave and into the little clearing, one of the guards whistled, and all five jogged towards them. At first, Joyce thought they must have a message for Sung, but as soon as they reached them, all five dropped to one knee, arms across their chests.

"Good morning, my Queen," they each said, bowing their heads.

Chapter Twenty

The King and Queen of Anima

Sung smiled at her, one eyebrow up. Joyce was startled. "Good morning!"

"Pleasure to serve you today, Majesty," the man with the double armband that marked him as shift leader said.

"Um, thank you?" She looked at Sung, who grinned and led her between the men, still bowing. They stood, one by one, as she passed, clapping that arm to their chests again and shouting.

"Queen Joyce! Long live the Queen!"

Then, they followed her and Sung to shadow them down the path as usual. But she caught a couple of grins from the men towards Sung and his scowl in return. The men never walked closely, but she knew their hearing was too good for a private conversation, so she gave Sung a look.

"What was that all about?" she whispered.

"You will see," he smiled again, but it did not reach his eyes. He was scanning the forest around them, his eyes already shadowed by lack of sleep, now haunted, as if he expected an attack at any moment.

"Sung, what is wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing," he said, shushing her, "I am just tired."

"Me too; maybe we should nap this afternoon," she said slyly.

"Yes, yes, sure," Sung said, but she could tell he had not registered what she had said. She was about to ask again as they descended the path and into the city centre. But then they were suddenly mobbed.

Anima

SUNG

They had barely entered the circle before the children started screaming and running to them, cheering for their beautiful new queen and throwing flowers at her feet. Joyce looked like she had swallowed a poisoned frog.

Then, everyone else began to flock. Sung was torn between joy over watching his people celebrate his mate and anger that they had waited until now and had not believed in her before. He accepted the congratulations alongside the looks that said 'about time'.

But soon, he could see Joyce was becoming overwhelmed, so he stepped between her and the crowd and insisted they let them go get breakfast.

"Got to keep your strength up!" one of the females called, and the crowd laughed. Joyce's face went beet red.

Sung took her hand and led her through the crowd, keeping his eyes and nose open for the brothers. He was unsure when they would appear but knew it would not be long. The pounding began when they entered the market, weaving between the tables. Within seconds, the people started to clap and cheer, and while Joyce looked confused, Sung just shook his head and tried to smile.

Erwin led a group of six or seven other men out, their feet stamping in time with the spears they pounded on the ground at every step. They chanted an ancient tale that had been updated by this group to include suggestive metaphors and downright dirty subplots. The people laughed and cheered.

There was no chance he was getting out of this quietly.

Sung sighed.

"What is going on?" Joyce asked uncertainly as the people stepped back to give Erwin and the others room to circle him, all still stamping and chanting.

"I have a ... uh ... meeting with the brotherhood..." he said through his teeth. Joyce frowned, but he just kissed her quickly to the cheers and applause of his people and whispered. "It will only take a couple of hours, I promise. I will see you at lunch," Erwin stood before him before she could respond, and the stamping stopped.

Laurie Bowler

The crowd of watchers went silent as Erwin grinned and bowed with a flourish, his voice raised so everyone near the market could hear. "Our brother has found his mate!" Everyone cheered again. Sung smiled past gritted teeth. Joyce tried to smile, but she was still staring at him with a question. "The brotherhood requests your presence, oh majesty. Sire of our nation, the highest name in all the land."

"Yes, yes, Erwin. An audience is granted," he muttered

There were titters and boos that he had stopped Erwin from making a show. But his friend was not finished.

"Thank you, oh mighty, king Gareth Ollie, the seventh in the royal line to take and hold the throne. As today marks the beginning of your kinship and the great reign of your Queen Joyce Thorpe, we ask for a gift that can come only from your hand!" Sung sighed. He had known his brothers would take full advantage of this day, but this was just making a spectacle! They would pay for this. "Do you have a gift for your people, oh might king?" Erwin was enjoying this too much.

"I will declare today a holiday," Sung ground out. "No trade, no training. Let the people feast and play."

The crowd cheered again, and the children's squeals were so loud that Joyce winced, but she smiled and clapped with the littlest ones, who rushed to her in excitement.

For a split second, Sung saw her, heavy with a cub and pulling another youngster by the hand, her cheeks full and red, her skin glowing as she came to greet him. He blinked, and the mental picture faded, but the feeling it left jolted him to his toes, and he gaped at her.

She frowned and stepped up close.

"Sung, are you -"

"Thank you, fair sir!" Erwin called with yet another ridiculous bow. "And now the brotherhood would take their audience with you, mighty king and leave your fair bride to the hands of the females for safekeeping."

"Just a moment," Sung said, then pulled Joyce into his chest and bent her backwards over his arm, kissing her soundly. He pulled her back quickly, grinning at the befuddled look on her face, and whispered.

Anima

“Sorry, I thought we would have more time,” then passed her into the hands of Talia, who was smirking behind her. “Pray for our success and good things for the heart of Anima!”

“Pray thee well!” the people shouted in response.

Then, the men circled Sung and led him away. Joyce stared, wide-eyed, at his back, and he turned and waved to her from behind his brothers and begged the creator that she wouldn’t be harassed too much without him.

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

Joyce just shook her head as the men stomped and sang Sung away. What the hell was going on? And why hadn't he told her he would leave her to deal with all these people alone while they talked about her losing her virginity? Talia tugged at her elbow as the man disappeared from the market. She had a broad, warm smile and put her arm around Joyce's shoulders, which she had never done before.

"Well done," she said quietly, then let Joyce greet more of the children who wanted to bring her flowers or touch her hand. When they ran off, Joyce turned to her.

"I am so confused; what is going on?"

Talia led her around the tables before they were interrupted again and waited until they sat down on the podium before she answered.

"The people are acknowledging your mating and reign as Queen."

Joyce shook her head. "Just because we had sex?"

Talia winked. "Normally," she said. "These celebrations would have happened the day after the mating ceremony. But since things have been delayed... well, let us just be grateful everything is finally as it should be," she said, taking a mouthful of fruit.

But Joyce was still confused. "Where have they taken Sung? What are they going to do with him?"

Talia flapped a hand, the wide sleeve of her cloak floating in the breeze. "Oh, that is just some alpha male bullshit," she said, wrinkling her nose. "Those males have some kind of secret code or something. Every time one mate, the other makes a big song and dances about it."

"Literally," Joyce said dryly, and Talia laughed.

As Joyce picked her food and waved at more greetings, Talia leaned into her ear. "So... how was it?" Joyce felt her cheeks go hot again. Talia squawked a laugh and slapped her thigh. "I knew he would make us proud. I was slightly worried when we did not hear the roar last night. You certainly left us all hanging."

"Heard the – you guys were waiting for that?"

Talia snorted. "We have been waiting for it every night for a week."

Anima

"That is just gross."

"In what way?"

"Who sits around waiting to hear that other people have had sex?"

"A people whose lives depend on their ancestry, the strength of their bloodlines and the protection of their history," the bird-woman said frankly. "Joyce, I know this is very different to your world, but at some point, you must try to see things from our point of view. We have not travelled to your world; you have travelled to ours."

"Against my will," she muttered.

Talia frowned. "You would choose otherwise if you could?" Her voice held an edge of warning.

"No, not now. I mean... Sung... No, I do not want to leave. I just meant that it is a little rough expecting me to roll over and become Anima when I was not given a choice in the matter."

"Were you given a choice about the colour of your skin?"

"No, but that is -"

"The colour of your eyes or the heritage of your parents?"

"No, that is not what I meant!"

"How about the time that you were born into the world? Could you choose that?"

Joyce folded her arms. "Those things are completely different!"

"Did you ever think to question them?"

"No, I just grew up that way. It never even occurred to me to..." she trailed off as Talia nodded and raised an eyebrow.

"You live, now, in a people whose lives have looked like this for a millennium. You rule, now, over people who have never seen your world and would never hope to. Take your place, Queen Joyce, without complaint. Or those of us who have been here all along may question why the honour was given to you."

Joyce finished the meal in sheepish silence.

Laurie Bowler

Chapter Twenty-One

Blood Brothers

SUNG

Sung sighed with relief when they got out of the city and finally made it to the cave where they had been meeting since they were in their teens. The taunts from his brothers were merciless but easier to bear where no one else could hear them.

“Only took you a week, brother.”

“She is either the strongest Queen Anima has ever seen, or she had tied your tail around her -”

“Do not finish that sentence,” Sung growled at Nhor, one of the other Leonine.

The men all laughed and only increased their teasing.

“I thought someone showed you how to handle your carrot years ago, Sung. But maybe we need to have a chat? You see when two Anima love each other very much, they have a special kind of hug....”

The men laughed and clapped Sung on the back so hard he almost choked. But he kept his chin up. He was the last of the brothers to mate; unfortunately, he had made more than his fair share of jokes and jibes when the others had their days.

He knew he was going to pay for it now.

The teasing continued until they were all seated in the cave. They had not met for months, so Sung dusted off his seat before he sat and waited for the others. They all sat in the circle within a minute, Erwin to his right, chatting and mocking Sung. Sung ground his teeth and reminded himself it was all designed to get him off balance. They did not think about these things.

But finally, Erwin raised his hand, and the seven other men quieted.

“Sung,” Erwin said solemnly.

“Yes?”

“As king, we have witnessed and applaud your service and selflessness. We are grateful to have you as our leader.” There were nods and murmurs of agreement around the room. Then

Anima

Erwin grinned. "But as a brother of the secret keepers, your hairy ass is ours for the next two hours. It is time to taste your own medicine."

The room erupted in laughter and jeers. Sung shook his head and ran his hand through his hair.

"I know you have all tasted the pointy end of my stick in the past," he started, "but-

"Maybe that is what was wrong? Maybe that is why she did not want to do it?"

The men burst out laughing, and Sung nodded grimly. "Yes, keep them coming."

"The mating bond feeling a little tight today?" Erwin asked. "Suddenly rethinking the wisdom of all those years of jokes and taunts, my king?"

"Do your worst," Sung said as they mocked. "As king, it has always been necessary to be the strongest in the room. If you can't handle it, well..." he shrugged. Erwin raised an eyebrow, and the others made noises of anticipation.

"You heard our fearless leader, men," Erwin said, widening his smile. "It is time for the mating initiation!"

The men leapt to their feet and jostled each other as they descended on Sung. They tied him to the chair in the tradition of these meetings, a symbol of a brother's responsibility to stay in the seat, no matter what was thrown at him.

Sung sighed but knew the only way out of this was to go through it, and it was true he had taken great delight in pinning down his brothers on their mating days. So, it was only fair that he allowed them to do the same.

There was no fast order in the brotherhood, no specific rules. Once they tied him, the others began peppering him with questions in no particular order. It was not a test so much as a good-natured way for the others to find out where he might be weak and offer advice.

"If you have not already, you will have your first fight soon. Tell me, Sung, what is the best way to soothe a female's feelings after you have placed a massive paw squarely in your mouth?"

Sung grimaced. "She needs to hear that I know I did wrong and will endeavour not to do it again."

"What do you do if a male is sniffing around your wife, but she has not realised it yet?"

Laurie Bowler

Sung gave them all a pointed look. "Well... I could have him sent to the camps unless he touched her, in which case I would bite out his throat somewhere, and she would not see it happen."

They all laughed, knowing it was doubtful any male in Wildwood would ever attempt to steal Sung's mate. Mating changes in the Anima were extremely rare, but they did occur.

Around and around they went, some questions little more than jokes, others quite serious. Since Sung was the last male to mate, they had all been through this seven times before and knew the answers. However, Sung admitted that the reminders were not nasty, like remembering that females needed time with other females and encouraging her towards that, rather than becoming jealous of her time.

Things got awkward when one of them brought up the mother-in-law, and Sung had to remind them that Joyce was an orphan.

"Lucky son of a bitch," Nohr muttered. The others howled.

Eventually, the question time drew to a close, and Sung sighed. The next part of the ceremony was uncomfortable. The men went quiet, and all teasing stopped as they waited patiently. Erwin was the secret keeper for Sung as Sung was for Erwin, which meant for this part, Erwin asked the questions.

He took the seat furthest from Sung and locked eyes with him.

"These men stand witness, Sung, of your knowledge, pledge, and secrets. The time has come for confession; absolve your heart, brother. Open to us and leave nothing unturned. What sins do you carry? What regrets? What dreams? Share your burdens, let the brothers carry them, and hold you up to your goals."

Sung let a breath pass before he nodded. "What do you want to know?"

"Name the females you have formerly enjoyed. All of them, and if any feelings remain, confess them."

Sung was glad the ties to the chair were more ceremonial than restraint. They passed over his upper arms but left his hands free to rub his face. He started in his teens, naming names and answering any questions about the relationship his brothers raised. He was winding his way

Anima

through the twelve years he had been mating, unlike he had now with Joyce. But he now knew the act of mating and what a pale reflection it was.

He shook his head and took a deep breath before locking eyes with Erwin.

“And the last before Joyce was... Lucine.”

Erwin’s face became thunderous, and the others sat back in their chairs.

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

When Sung disappeared from the market with the other men, Joyce was at a loss again. Why did this keep happening? Why was he always taken from her? She turned, uncertain where to go, and found Talia grinning behind her.

“Where are they going?” she asked.

Talia shrugged. “That is one tradition I know nothing about. It happens every time one of those men mates, but they do not tell us what they are doing.”

“Alpha-male bullshit.” The words were muttered to Joyce’s right, and she turned. Khloe stood, arms folded, glowering in the direction the men had disappeared. “They hide off in some little cave they discovered as cubs and beat their chests and roar and decide they are big, strong men because they keep secrets,” she snorted. “They all crawl back in later looking sheepish,” She waved a hand. “They do it every time one of their mates as if they just discovered the practice or something.”

Joyce bit her lip to keep from laughing. “Why did they not do it after the flames and smoke, then?” she asked curiously.

Khloe looked at her evenly. “Because in Anima, mates are not truly recognised until their scents entwine. Which happens after they... consummate.”

Joyce flushed, her cheeks going hot. She wanted to hide her face. “For a minute, I had forgotten that everyone in this place is... I mean, that they can tell...” she mumbled, rubbing her temples. “This is so embarrassing.”

Khloe frowned. “Embarrassing? Why? Everyone mates eventually. Why would they mock you for doing the same?”

“No, not that, I just mean... that people know... never mind,” she finished lamely as the woman only looked more confused. But Khloe sighed and seemed to shake her confusion off.

“Do not let it concern you, girl. The men have... you would call it a secret society, I believe? But it is little more than men playing at being boys and making themselves feel important. The real work today will be done by the females. Are you ready?” Khloe asked.

“Ready for what? Joyce asked.

Anima

“To meet the Women’s council. They are eager to get to know their Queen. We spoke about this, remember?”

Joyce looked at her, speechless for a moment. “Oh, right. I mean, I guess? I did not realise _.”

“Don’t worry, girl. Nothing is going to happen to you. Women work with their wits, not their fists. Most of the time,” she grinned, and the expression looked so odd on her usually sour face that Joyce was unsure whether to smile back.

“Well, then sure,” Joyce said. “Can I grab something to eat first?”

Khloe winked. “You would not want to. We have the best baker in the city, and she made buttercakes this morning.”

“In that case, let us go!” Joyce said, trying to sound upbeat and not let on how nervous she suddenly felt. As if she could tell, Talia squeezed her shoulder, then waved as they moved away.

Joyce was unsure what she had expected about going with Khloe, but it was not a twenty-minute hike through the forest, then a five-minute climb up a mountain path to her cave. Joyce was sweating and breathing heavily when they got to the cave entrance. Something that had been made even more embarrassing by Khloe, who was an older woman not even puffing.

“You need to start working your body, girl,” Khloe growled as she pushed aside a curtain and entered the cave. “You will be surprised how your body responds here in Anima. Much faster than in your world, I will bet.”

“Responds to what?”

“To hard work, humans live unnatural lives these days; their bodies have a lot of toxins that hold them back and weaken them. A few weeks of Anima air and food, and you start exercising, you will be surprised how quickly you build muscle and fitness.”

“I... okay. I will try.”

Khloe nodded like that was expected and led her into the cave. Joyce peered around, fascinated.

Laurie Bowler

The cave appeared to be one large room with a kitchen or a laboratory on one side, a large cage at the end near the door, and a small bedroom set on the other. As if Khloe lived her work.

“Welcome to my home,” she said quietly.

In the middle of the large room was a massive table, a solid slab of rock, polished smooth on top, sitting atop two wide, round cross-cut tree trunks. It was beautiful and imposing and surrounded by six other women. Keep calm, Joyce reminded herself, who watched her with keen interest.

Khloe swept into the space, dropping her bag near the door and ushering Joyce towards the table and the women seated there. They were all older like Khloe, still fit and strong, but their skin was weathered and, in some cases, hair greying.

She introduced Joyce to all of them, who promptly forgot their names and prayed she would not need to use them before someone else did to remind her. Khloe offered her a chair on the long side of the table, which she took, and then she was passed a plate of what looked to be fresh muffins and told to help herself, so she did.

They were the most delicious she had ever eaten.

“They are amazing!” she mumbled around her second bite. “Who made them?”

“That would be Suze, our best baker, like I told you,” Khloe said as one of the younger women waved at her from the other end of the table. “But do not gush too much. It will go to her head,” all the women at the table chuckled, and Suze blushed. “But enough about baking; we are not meant to get stuck on silly details; we are here for a reason... which are you, Joyce.”

Joyce blinked and stopped chewing as the women turned their eyes to her, some with curiosity, others with suspicion. “What did I do?” she said, swallowing a lump of muffin and almost choking on it.

“You mated the king, of course,” Khloe said as if Joyce were slightly stupid. “Which means you become our Queen, which means it is our job to prepare and guide you.”

“It is?”

“Yes, in the pride, the females always take the lead on... pretty much everything except politics and war. And as Queen, you have an important role to play.”

Anima

“I do?” Joyce was unsure whether to be excited that she would have a job to do here or terrified as the disapproving murmurs around the table rose.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Absolution

SUNG

“Lucine was untouched,” Erwin said through his teeth. “She was a sacrifice.”

“Untouched by any but me,” Sung said through gritted teeth; it was perhaps the greatest regret of his life. “It was weeks ago. I knew the wolves were going to send her, she told me. We were at the harvest, and I had too much to drink. I had wandered into the meadow to stare at the stars, and she followed. She was there and made herself available. She talked to me for hours about how we were destined and how she was the strongest sacrifice. I did not doubt that. But she had me seeing it, that it did not matter if she waited because she would win the rite and we would be mates. And frankly, I was out of my mind about the whole rite, to begin with, so barbaric. It appealed to me to subvert it. I was not thinking clearly; I... gave in.”

Erwin shook his head. “You broke the rite, Sung. I can’t believe you broke the rite and then rejected her?”

“They brought Joyce for Lucine to slaughter,” he snarled, all his protective nature for his childhood friend now entwined with his love for his mate. “They broke the rite too, choosing my mate for the sacrifice. They knew Erwin. I do not know how, but they knew. It was a powerplay, and we all know it. They thought... they thought Lucine would kill her, and I would mate Lucine, which would forever be a reminder....” Sung’s breathing sped up at the sheer fury he felt inside his chest at his closest friend’s face. “I confess,” he said softly but firmly. “I admit my fault; I ask for absolution.”

He did not need to remind these men that they had all brought confessions to him in this room and been forgiven. That they had all been shamed or shocked in this room before. That was the point of the ceremony to begin anew with one’s mate. To let the past stay behind. Erwin knew it, and Sung knew he would get over this and absolve his friend and King. But damn, it hurt to see judgement in his eyes.

“You are forgiven, of course,” Erwin said quietly, his eyes never leaving Sung’s. “But do you have further confession? Is your soul cleansed, Sung, or is there more?”

Anima

Sung took a deep breath. "The wolves chose Joyce because I knew her already." The men in the room all made noises of shock or disbelief. Erwin went very still, his eyes widening. Sung cleared his throat. "I chose her at the rite because I knew and cared about her from the years I had spent in the human world as a child."

Erwin got to his feet, and his jaw dropped. "You admit treason against your people by choosing an insufficient mate?" he asked, hushed.

"No! I knew she was the better choice because I knew both women. I know Joyce is different; she is my true mate. Not just a chosen female, she is my heart's bond. She was chosen for me by the creator, and she will serve Anima well."

"She is weak!"

Sung growled. "She is weaker than our females in body but not in the ways our kingdom needs. I knew as soon as I saw her refuse to kill Lucine after she had watched Lucine kill the others that she was exactly what I needed, what we needed. I chose true."

"Then why raise it in confession?" Erwin snapped.

"Because I have hidden my knowledge of her and ... of Lucine."

"That is why you rejected Lucine?" one of the other men asked.

Sung nodded. "I had intended, after taking Lucine, to keep her as a mate. I did not see another way. I would have made her Queen. But when Joyce chose not to kill her..." Sung raised his eyes to meet Erwin's. "It was within my right to kill Lucine when I chose Joyce. I could have covered my crime, and I did not."

"Admirable. But if it comes to light..."

Sung winced. "I pray to the creator that it never does. Lucine is now free to take a lover; I pray she will. I pray she will move beyond her mate, her hate and shame, and begin rebuilding her life."

"Her life is substantially diminished now because of your rejection."

"That would have happened whether we had mated or not," Sung said, his voice as hard as steel. "As soon as the wolves brought Joyce into that circle, they decided Lucine's fate. While I take no pleasure in ruining the female, it was at the hands of her people that it happened."

Laurie Bowler

The men looked back and forth between themselves soberly. But Sung kept his eyes on Erwin. As the secret keeper, only he could absolve Sung; the others would follow if he did. So Sung stared at his closest friend and silently begged him to offer it.

Erwin's face was pale; he had not expected this, and he knew Sung regretted it. He knew he would hurt his friend by hiding all this from him.

"Is there any more?" Erwin asked quietly.

Sung shook his head. "None; you know everything now."

Erwin stared a moment longer, and Sung held his breath. The room was utterly silent, as if the other men held their breath too. But then Erwin broke the gaze and turned his head to scowl at the wall.

"Absolution is granted," he said darkly. "You are our brother, and we are one."

"You are brother; we are one," the others recited.

Sung heaved a sigh of relief as one of them walked over to remove the bonds around him. He looked at each of them in turn before speaking.

"Thank you, brothers. I am humbled. And I assure you, nothing I have shared changes my commitment to you or the Kingdom. I have... made some mistakes. I ask your assistance to do better in the future."

The men nodded but kept glancing at Erwin, who was still tense. But he eventually nodded and led them as Sung was freed from the restraints to the centre of the room. Then, as was the custom, Sung stood in the middle of the room as each man exchanged vows with him. In the past, Sung had always been one of the men in line. He was surprised and humbled by how emotional it made him to see his closest friends and confidants kneel before him, not as a king but as their brother.

"I vow to you, as my blood is your blood, that should you ever leave us, I will watch over your mate and her offspring. I vow to you, as my blood is your blood, should anyone, bar the creator, ever take your life, I will avenge your death. As my blood is your blood, I vow to hold your secrets, absolve your sins, and stand with you in battle..."

Man after man, some soberly, others with a grin, made their vow to him, and he to them. He was the last in the circle to mate. Their bonds were now complete, and their mates and

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offspring were safe. And Sung realised he did feel lighter for laying down his burdens and allowing his brothers to know and forgive him.

He just prayed the troubled expression on Erwin's face after the vow did not herald difficulty between them.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Cohorts

JOYCE

The women around the table looked at each other unhappily and murmured to each other as Joyce shook her head. She needed to stop sounding like an idiot.

"I am sorry," she said. "I'm not trying to sound dense. What I meant was that it excites me. Because I have been trying to figure out what I can do here. I think life is so different; I must build new skills."

"Of course, of course. But firstly, you will be the mother of all of us," Khloe said, taking a bite of her muffin. "Queen, Joyce, leader of the pride and champion of... well, we will get to that part later. First, we must do what we can to help."

Joyce perked up at that. "I just recently learned that the Anima way is different from mine. Perhaps you tried to show me before, and I... did not notice. I am sorry; things work very differently in my world. If you have tried to show me something already and I missed it. I will do better. I will pay attention. But I will tell you that I find it much easier to be... told. Or at least have someone tell me they will show me something. I... learned quite differently growing up than you do here."

Khloe nodded thoughtfully. "That is good to know. Perhaps before we start, we should ask you if you have any questions for us."

Joyce blew out a breath. "So many. I don't know where to start. Tell me what you do here; what is the women's circle?"

Khloe smiled. "Well, the truth is we do whatever we are good at. Traditionally, we are wise women, advisors, counsellors, and sometimes healers. We are viewed by pride as... wise ones. We are a resource to you; as Queen, you can delegate where our responsibility is to go. And we will come to you with petitions for you to take to the king."

"Wise women... you teach?"

"We lead by example. We help women in all the tribes, especially the Leonine, with everything from family to mating. We sometimes tangle with the men in politics, though it's of

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little interest to us.” Khloe dusted off her top. “In short, Joyce, once we are satisfied that you are the appropriate Queen, we will be your public support and private consort. We will be the women you come to with your ills, and we will be the women who come to you with correction and assistance.”

Joyce swallowed. “How do I satisfy you that I’m... appropriate?” She thought the mating was what they were all hung up on. Was there more?

“There are two main things we are concerned about,” Khloe said. “The first and most important is the true mate bond, which I am now confident about. Do any of you have any concerns there?” The women all leaned towards her and inhaled deeply but shook their heads. They, apparently, liked what they smelled, Joyce thought as she looked at Khloe, who was smiling. “We are confident now that you are the creator’s intention for Sung, which is a huge relief. We have been waiting a decade to meet you.”

Joyce blinked. “Wow, thank you, I guess.”

“But being queen requires much more discipline and intention than simply being intended, though that is an excellent foundation. Tell me, whom are you considering for your cohorts?”

“Cohorts? What -”

“What has Sung told you about the feast tonight and your role in it?”

“There is a feast?” Joyce squeaked.

Khloe dropped her head, and the other women grumbled under their collective breaths.

“I swear, that man....” Khloe sighed. Then looked at Joyce patiently. “Yes, there is a feast tonight, specifically to celebrate the union of our king and queen. And during that feast, you will be expected to appoint the beginnings of your cohort. Has Sung explained any of this?”

“No,” Joyce said and felt like a fool. “But... he has had a lot going on.”

Khloe’s lips tightened. “Do not get me started on how that boy should have handled himself and you for the past week. But we must accept what we cannot change. So...” she looked at the other women, who all seemed equally unimpressed. “I guess we have a few hours until lunch. And we had better make the most of it!” She clapped her hands, and the women all

Laurie Bowler

straightened. “Hunter, can you please explain the feast? Then, Porsha, you can take the cohort question.”

Joyce took a deep breath and settled in to listen as the women unravelled a web of tradition and political roles that made her stomach twist with nerves. She didn’t get all of it. She knew she would have to get Khloe to explain some of the details again later, but from what she gathered, as queen, she was expected to have a group of people around her who would hold positions that gave them status among the Anima in their own right. Yet, their role would be to... help her.

She had to choose companions, only one to start with, but women she trusted to be friends and watch out for her as a woman and mate. Then she also needed a second, someone who would be trusted by her to handle details, but also by the people because that person would take over her duties should something befall her or she had to travel with Sung. And then, finally, she needed an advisor. Anima she trusted to help her make decisions, challenge her thinking, and generally make sure she did not make a fool of herself.

“These roles will expand as the people you choose to prove their value in certain areas of your life. You will bring more into your circle as needs arise. Occasionally, you will lose a cohort. But in short, these people will be seen as your... circle and your pack. What they do will reflect on you, so choose wisely.”

Joyce gaped. “How can I possibly choose these people when I barely know anyone?”

“You must have come in contact with many Animas by now,” one of the women said. Huncer, she thought... said with slight impatience. “Trust your instincts. The creator gave them to you for a reason.”

That was the same thing Sung had said to her when they entered the flames and smoke. And that had proven to be just the right thing to do.

So, Joyce planted her hands on the table and nodded. “Okay, I mean... yes, I can do that. I can... I mean, yes, I will trust my instincts. Can you give me some ideas on what I am looking for in the right people for these roles?” she asked.

Khloe smiled.

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SUNG

As the men relaxed and began to socialise now that their traditions were done, Sung thanked each of them. But the hair on the back of his neck stayed at attention because his second, his best friend, continued to stare at him with dark eyes.

When Sung had finally made it through the others, Erwin approached and asked him to go for a walk. They said farewell to the others; Sung weathered a couple more jokes about how long it had taken him to convince his wife to mate. Then he and Erwin stepped out into the daylight scattered under the forest trees. Sung did not speak and waited for his friend to find the words he was searching for.

Finally, Erwin snorted. "Were you honest back there? Did you choose her for the sacrifice or lead someone to it?" he asked.

"No. I had no idea until I stepped into the clearing and recognised her."

Erwin's nose wrinkled, but Sung knew he would scent how steady he was. There was no deception in him. "Then how did the wolves know to choose her? How did they know about her? I did not even know about her!"

"I do not know; that is what I am struggling with. They knew enough that her death would be painful for me, even after this many years. But I have not spoken to anyone about her in ten years. And the last person I did talk to was my mother; it just does not make sense," Sung rolled his head on his shoulders, trying to loosen the tension in his neck. "But, short of finding a wolf willing to reveal tribal secrets, I do not know how to find out, either."

They both snorted at that idea. The wolves, even the good ones, were first and foremost loyal to their family packs and clans. Their heart for Anima and its people ranked a very poor second.

"Why?" Erwin began, then chewed his lip for a moment, thinking. "Why did you not tell me about her?"

Sung sighed. "Brother, we became close after I had left the human world. I thought... At first, I thought my care for her would grow cold. Once I accepted, I would not see her again. She could not come to Anima... when I started to pursue other female companies... there did not seem to be any point in telling anyone. She was a fever dream."

Anima

Erwin's eyebrows rose. "So, that is what changed!"

"What?"

"When we were, what, fifteen? Sixteen? Until then, remember you'd had all those grand ideas about saving yourself for your mate? Then, one day, it was like a flip just switched, and you were suddenly game. I poked you about it for months, but you just said you changed your mind."

"I did," Sung sighed. It had been his seventeenth birthday. He remembered it well for a variety of reasons.

"Why did you not tell me after you chose her?" Erwin asked.

"Because it all happened so quickly, I was... I did not have time to think. When I saw her, we were already there. The rite had to begin. I thought she was dead. I grieved, but when she survived... then I realised she did not recognise me."

"How could she not?" Erwin demanded. "Your scent alone -"

"She does not know the scent, Erwin. Not in that way. She is very different from us. She relies on her eyes, and I have changed quite a bit since I was ten," he chuckled, but the laughter did not last long. "And she was terrified. She did not ask me until the next day whether we had met before; she says now she had some inkling, but even in that, it was only recognition. She could not place it. I dodged the question at the time."

"Does she know now?" Erwin asked.

"Yes, I spoke to her at length before that mess with the silent one. I did not want word getting out from the wolves, and then she would hear it from someone else..."

"This smack of a plot goes far deeper than just trying to set you off-balance, Sung. They expected this to achieve something."

Sung growled. "They expected I would watch Lucine slay her, then mate Lucine, cementing her power over me, even my past. It was a sinister move. Genius, if it had worked."

"The question is, how did they know that it would be powerful for you? How did they know you had not given up on her?"

"I do not know," Sung growled. "But it means I have to watch for anything else they may have learned that I had thought was private. I do not mind telling you, friend, that I do not believe

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they will stop. I do not think things will settle down now that Joyce is established. I need you to keep a close eye on them. Did we ever hear from the elders about the youth attack?"

"They are making all the right noises about kids running off on their own and how they will discipline them within the packs when they return from the camps, but I do not buy it, Sung. Those were not hot-headed adolescents. Luerst is the son of Lucan's sister. You can't tell me that boy does not understand the political threads he pulled."

"More likely was assigned to pull," Sung muttered. Erwin nodded his agreement.

Erwin kept walking, his face set like stone. "Did you choose her for any reason beyond compassion, Sung?" He finally asked quietly but firmly.

"Yes," Sung said, his voice steel. "I have known since our childhood that her heart is... valuable. A heart like hers is needed by the Anima, Erwin. I do not know if it was the wars or our isolation, but I feel like we are becoming more of our animal selves, not less. We need some humanity in our world. I am certain of it."

"If it had been another human woman, would you have chosen her?"

"I can't know. That is the plain truth. I can't know. I felt a fierce sense of relief that it was not Lucine. But I walked into that clearing, convinced that it would be. So, I can only thank the creator for finding another way."

"Lucine," Erwin huffed. "That was poorly done, Sung. Very poorly done."

Sung hung his head and clawed his hands through his hair. "I know, I regret it. Deeply."

Erwin sighed. "We must stop scrambling and start planning. The wolves are not done."

Sung agreed, but he feared it was worse than that. He feared they were only getting started.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Champion

JOYCE

“It is good that you understand that a person’s heart and mind are more important than their skills,” Khloe said approvingly.

Joyce was unsure she had thought about it that deeply, but she understood it was true, so she nodded.

“Whom you choose should probably be influenced by whom you intend to champion. Though they will all be expected to challenge you at times to keep you humble and to make sure your decisions stand strong up under scrutiny, you do not want people close to you who will fight. You will have enough of that from the wolves.”

A titter erupted around the table, and the woman, Huncer, muttered. “We have all had enough of that from the wolves,” which made the others chuckle more.

“So, tell us, Joyce, what passion burns within you? What people or groups do you wish to help thrive in Anima?”

Joyce let herself sink back into the chair. “I am not sure I know enough... what do you mean by champion?”

Khloe looked like she was trying hard not to roll her eyes. “A champion is a patron who supports and encourages others in their pursuits. For example, Sung’s mother was a great hunter, so she championed the fur traders and pieces of jewellery. She helped us set up apprenticeships for the young of Anima. She brought attention to the best traders by wearing their furs and encouraging others to do the same. Sung’s grandmother was a wise woman, but she championed the arts. She believed that through creative expression, Anima grew bolder and more enlightened. She was the one who began the traditions of the weekly readings, and many of her programs still exist today.”

Joyce swallowed hard. “That is... great. But do I have to do something that is associated with money? Or can I... give to people?”

Khloe tipped her head. “Give what?”

Laurie Bowler

“Well, when you describe that, the first thing that comes to mind is that I would like to help Anima, who is... less fortunate.”

Khloe’s face softened. “That is a beautiful thought, Joyce, but you will find a difference here from your human world. In Anima, no one goes hungry or lacks basic needs, no matter their standing among the people. We would not allow it. Our tribes and clans always provide.”

Joyce nodded. “That is wonderful. But what about... people who are different? Unaccepted? Shunned?”

The women around the table began to eye each other. Joyce could not read their feelings.

“What brings this up?” Khloe asked quietly.

“Well, I am very different. And it’s come to my attention that there are those among the Anima who are also seen as different or unacceptable in some way. It seems if I am in a position of power, I could use it to help those people become more successful somehow?”

The woman Khloe had called Porsha spoke up. “What about education, then? Many youths struggle during their schooling years. The children can be so ruthless. Perhaps you could aid those children at the bottom of their packs?”

Joyce forced a smile. “That is a good idea, for sure. And I think I would like to do that. But I was thinking more about the adults who are not learning and growing anymore but are just trying to live their lives and perhaps having a difficult time. The ones who maybe think they do not have much to offer?”

“That is a very fine goal, Joyce, but I must tell you, it may make some people uneasy. Are you prepared to argue your case to the people and perhaps find barriers from those who are more close-minded? Are you willing to fight to gain assistance for whatever projects you try? Because that kind of goal will divide the people around you.”

“Why? Why would anyone have a problem with me helping those who are struggling?”

The women around the table all shifted in their seats and looked uneasy. Khloe thought for a moment. “I believe the humans call it survival of the fittest,” she said carefully. “But it is an instinct for us. Those among us who lack and do not make up for it with great strength in another area are a risk to the rest. A drain on resources and a potential limitation to the bloodline. To

Anima

build these individuals up may assist them as Anima, but it will not help the pride, the people, as a whole.”

“How can you know that? How can you know unless you try?”

Khloe looked at her firmly but with warmth. “Because, Joyce, those people have been kept outside the pride, the packs and the herds for a reason. And that means that others will be very cautious about blending their bloodlines or livelihoods with someone who may end up costing, rather than helping them.”

“That is a very brutal way to look at a person’s life.”

Khloe raised a single eyebrow. “One day, we may discuss the ruthlessness of the so-called justice system in your world, Joyce, but there is no time today. As a queen, you can champion whatever and whomever you wish. We only want you to understand how your proposal might be received. So, I ask you again, are you willing to fight for this cause? To work with your people to persuade them and to be educated and assisted to better understand us through it?”

“Yes, of course.”

Khloe nodded. “Then I will stand behind you in it,” she said firmly and looked at the other women.

And one by one, some with light in their eyes, others with sullen reluctance, they all made the same declaration.

“I will stand behind you in your endeavours.”

As Joyce, startled, received these statements from each of them, she swallowed hard and pushed her shoulders back and chin up. Sung had chosen her. If she was going to be here for the rest of her life, she would do it with a clear conscience. And she was going to fight so that no one had to go through what she was going through, rejected and suspected for things they did not understand or had no control over.

But as the conversation moved on from her championing to the feast and how she would be expected to dress and behave, Joyce’s mind kept returning to this issue of those within the Anima who were viewed with suspicion by the others.

And she thought she just might have an idea about how to begin chipping away at those prejudices.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The King and His Queen

SUNG

When he had finally finished with Erwin and the others, Sung raced back to the city to find Joyce. But he couldn't see her anywhere in the market square, and she was not back at their cave when he checked with the guards who waited at the trailhead to escort her if she went that way. They told him that she had been taken by the women's council, and they had been told in no uncertain terms that they were not to be near Khloe's cave.

Sung knew the risk to Joyce was much less now that they had mated. However, his skin still itched with anxiety as he ran for Khloe's cave, praying to the creator they had not taken her deeper into the forest. He was yearning to see her and make sure she was okay. And he still did not feel comfortable about her wandering around without guards. But on his way back, he saw her in the stalls with three of the females from the Women's Council. They stood before one of the clothing stalls, trying to find something for Joyce to wear to the feast.

Joyce was smiling, her cheeks pink, and her hair beginning to fall out of the braid she had twisted it into that morning, so it drifted around her face and neck in loose curls.

Khloe pointed something out on one of the dresses the merchant held, and Joyce laughed, then touched the fabric, and her eyes went wide. The merchant spoke to her, but she was like a child in her delight, mouth open, urging the others to touch it.

Sung hung back, watching them from behind a tree.

She was so beautiful and so sweet. Something about her was as pure as the title she had given for the rite, though he knew she possessed the heat of passion. His mind flashed to the night before... She sighed and clawed her fingers into his hair, kissing him, desperate. The feel of her skin when he cupped her thigh, then dragged his hand slowly up her leg. The delicious temptation of skin on the skin when he rolled against her, seeking that perfect slide that had made her gasp.

The mating huff sang out of his throat before he could yank it back, and every male Anima in the area went still, turning to watch him warily, head down and shoulders rolled forward.

Anima

Fuck. Now, he had to act like he had done it on purpose. With a rolling growl of dominance, he stalked into the open. All the males slunk away or kept their eyes down while the females watched with great interest or jealousy.

Joyce had not noticed his huff but had seen her companions shift their attention. She looked around, trying to find what had captured everyone, and then her eyes landed on him and widened, followed by a beaming smile that made his heart race. She watched him for two or three rolling steps before biting her lip, and her scent took on a new quality that perked the ears of every male in the area.

Suddenly very aware of her and the males near her, Sung snarled and had to stop himself from yanking her to his side in a show of possessiveness he knew was unnecessary, but his instincts were alight.

There was more than one way to demonstrate to any male watching that she belonged to him.

Strolling up to her quickly, he ignored Khloe's eye-roll and slid his hand to her waist as he joined her at the stall.

"Good morning," he said, more breathlessly than intended.

"I think you mean good afternoon," she said, smiling, but her eyes widened as he pulled her into his chest, bending her backwards over his arms, and kissed her soundly.

The children nearby screamed and laughed at their mothers and friends that the king was kissing the queen! As he straightened from the kiss and pulled her back upright, Joyce blushed, but he just nipped her ear and stroked the goosebumps on her arm, huffing his pleasure at how she responded to him.

"Sung, stop!" she whispered, but through a smile.

Khloe muttered something about alpha-male bullshit, and some council members tittered, but he did not care. He cared that any males close to him could smell the way his wife and mate blossomed in his arms. He cared that they smelled his sheer dominance and unbending certainty that she was his. And he cared that they pay special attention to the warning in him.

He would not accept any violation of her or her space.

She was his.

Laurie Bowler

The creator knew he had been hers all along, so it was only fair.

“Lovesick, fool,” Khloe whispered from behind him. He turned to give her a disapproving snort, but she was beaming at him. Females were strange.

“I do not mean to interrupt your preparations, wife -” Khloe snorted from behind him, but he ignored it, “- but something is pressing that I need to discuss with you. Could I steal you from the ladies for half an hour?”

“I am certain you do not need more than fifteen minutes for your pressing business, Sung,” Khloe said dryly and loudly enough for anyone to hear. Several of the women howled at that.

He cut her a withering glance. “Then you do not know your king very well,” he said in a deep buttery voice.

“Oo hoo!” The ladies liked that, and he winked at her when she shook her head, throwing up her hands in defeat.

“Fine, fine. Take your mate. She needs food, so do not bring her back until you have fed her after your business.”

Joyce looked back and forth between them, her cheeks reddening more with every word. Sung was troubled to scent some fear and embarrassment on her and gave her a quick, measuring look. Was she okay? Had something happened? But she was looking at Khloe.

So, he clasped their hands and led her away, calling back and waving to any people who cheered or greeted him as they passed. Some of the children ran along the path with them until they were called back by their parents, but Sung just kept leading her deeper into the forest.

Chapter Twenty-Six

In the Shade of the Forest

SUNG

When they were finally alone, he looked around in every direction, scented the air, noting the wind direction, and then darted off the trail, pulling her behind him.

“Sung, what -?”

“I missed you,” he said, rough and hurried, as he pulled her into the space behind one of the massive grandfather trees of the forest. Its trunk was so vast that he and Erwin could have stood beside each other behind it, and no one would have seen them. And because of its massive root structure, there was a clear space for several feet around it. Hemmed in by the bushes and trees nearby, it was like being in a little private alcove.

“I missed you, too, but – oh! Oh, what a lovely spot!” Joyce said as she pushed through under the bush to see where he had brought her. He turned to catch her eye, and she broke from scanning the little clearing to blinking at him. Then she smiled.

Without another word, he turned her so her back was against the tree. He braced himself on one arm to lean in over and kissed her, slow and tantalising, letting his teeth draw out her lower lip before retaking her mouth. She was surprised but caught up quickly, her eyes sparkling as she threw her arms around his neck and pulled him in.

“Hello,” he whispered against her lips a minute later, then dove in for another kiss. He did not pull away again until her breath had quickened, and it took her a moment to open her eyes.

“Hi,” she said breathlessly. “How did your meeting go?”

“Do you want to know about my meeting?” His voice was little more than a rasp. He drew a finger along her jaw, then down her neck, pushing aside the shirt collar so he could see her shoulder.

“Not really,” she said, dropping her head to the side to give him better access.

Laurie Bowler

He groaned as he placed his mouth on that beautiful, soft skin where her shoulder met her neck and sucked. Her breath caught, and her hand came up to cup his neck and hold him in, her body arching against him as his other hand trailed down her side to cup her bottom.

She kissed the base of his throat, then took one naughty hand down to slide up his leathered thigh and higher, cupping him through his pants. This suddenly was not just a kiss, and Sung ached to take her. He whispered her name and pressed her back into the tree, plastering himself against her. And she murmured his name too, her eyes closed and her breath coming quickly.

But they were so close to people; there were children out there! He wanted to growl in frustration, and he wanted her to touch him again.

With a warm purr in his throat, he took her mouth, cupping her neck, his thumb trailing the line of her soft throat. His other hand slid down the back of her thigh and pulled her leg up, hooking her knee over his hip so he could grind into her. And she responded like he had lit a fire in her. He gasped as she pulled him in, delighted that his mate, his true mate, seemed to want him as much as he wanted her.

“Joyce...” he groaned, but he could not find the words to express what a joy she was. So he kissed her again.

He could hear her blood pulsing in time with her rapid heartbeat, smell her desire rising, and shuddered when she rolled her hips against him. The slide of her tongue was so erotic that he almost gave in. He almost did it; he took her right there and to hell with the kids if they caught wind of what was happening.

But he knew... he knew she would be embarrassed if they were caught or someone commented on the scent. He knew she had already felt small because he had kissed her so openly and then discussed it with the other females. He has seen it in her face. It was a sharp reminder of how differently they had grown into adulthood and how easily he could harm her without her thinking.

He had to step softly with her. Let her find her balance in their world.

Anima

So, with a reluctant groan, he let his head drop to her shoulder, rolling his hips one more time and inhaling her scent when she gasped. But he slowed the pace, combed her hair back from her face with his fingers and pulled away far enough to meet her gaze.

Her head rested against the tree, and she looked at him through half-hooded eyes, her lips puffy from the kisses. Sung had to drop her leg and force himself to focus on her face, not the invitation she was giving with her eyes.

“Do we have to go to the feast?” She said, tracing a finger down his chest that made him shudder and almost grab her again. “Could we not just go back to the cave and... cuddle?”

He cleared his throat. “As tempting as that is,” he croaked, “it might end in the people dragging us out. They have been waiting a week for this already,” her eyes clouded. He cupped her face again, worried. “Hey, hey, I was joking. I just meant... I think we should go.”

“I know,” she sighed. “I just... I feel like I am constantly on the back foot here. All it will take is the wrong word or decision, and it will all disappear.”

“I am not disappearing, Joyce,” he said, stroking her cheek with his thumb, “ever.”

She sighed, and he waited, but she did not look up. Just continued to watch her hand stroking his chest. Following the thought process would set him off again, so he made himself focus.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice husky and even deeper than usual.

“Mostly,” she said, putting a hand on his cheek and letting her fingers curl into him in a way he was coming to adore. “The women... they are teaching me. I need that. I know I do; I just....”

“Can I help?”

She stared at him for a moment, then shook her head. “I think I need to find my way with this one,” she said. “But I do enjoy these little breaks. Can we take another one soon?” And she smiled.

Sung growled and kissed her again, and she laughed into his mouth.

It was the sweetest thing he had ever tasted.

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

They found her a dress. A dress made from shimmering white linen and embroidered in golds and browns in a starburst around her shoulders, falling like a cloud against her skin to sweep her ankles.

She felt pretty for the first time since she had arrived in Anima.

The females from the council wove flowers and leaves into her hair and gave her necklaces, bones, teeth, and coloured beads. When she was ready, they all walked with her. As they approached the market, other females from all the tribes gathered around them, some singing, some stomping their feet, others clapping. By the time they reached the market, they were a crowd, and Joyce was overwhelmed. She could not understand the words they sang and wondered what they said.

“What are they doing?” She leaned into Khloe’s ear.

The older woman walked alongside her, a small smile on her face. “They are calling your mate to tell him you are on your way and reminding him why he chose you.”

Joyce frowned. “What reasons are they?” she asked, confused.

Khloe smiled and winked. “They may not know you, Joyce, but they know your mate,” she said mysteriously. “Just relax and enjoy yourself. They are celebrating you tonight,” she started clapping in time with the others and raised her voice to the strange song.

Joyce could feel her cheeks heating, but she was surprised at her and of her stroking her hair, calling like they were excited. Then, as they entered the market and began to weave between the tables, Joyce saw the men on the other side stomping and singing, but in a song that seemed counter-pointed to the women’s.

The female voices soared and clapped when the males hit low notes and stomped their feet. And as the women sang hearty, throaty calls that made Joyce wonder precisely what they were saying, the males huffed and shuffled, clapping a beat at the end.

It was a fantastic show of unity, and Joyce found herself moved, though she could not say why.

Anima

Then the men parted, and she could see Sung walking up from the back in that long vest again, with the fur collar, but this time with necklaces like the ones the women had given her, only chunkier and more masculine.

The people stomped, called, and clapped them to the centre of the market, then Khloe took Joyce's hand and passed her to Sung, who winked and, without saying a word, turned her toward the podium. They walked up together slowly with her hand in his until they reached the stage level, and he ushered her to her seat next to his at the centre of the large table.

Then he stood, his chin high and shoulders back, holding her hand and watching his people with a broad smile. Joyce did her best to look dignified and pleased as Sung did, but inside, she was overwhelmed. The people below made one more circle of the market, still singing, and then the song ended on what had to be the lowest note she had ever heard people sing. Everyone turned then to face them, and Khloe called out. "A cry for King and Queen, a cry for Anima!"

And the market erupted with the calls, coughs, screeches, and roars of the people below. Joyce covered her mouth with one hand, and Sung squeezed her fingers as he leaned into her ear.

"They are celebrating you, you know," he said in a low voice. His tongue teased her ear for a breath before he pulled away.

"I just can't figure out why?" she turned to him and said honestly.

"Well, frankly, they are just grateful someone took me off their hands," he laughed, then he threw back his head and roared in response to his people, who all began to clap and cheer. When the noise started to settle, he addressed them. "Feast, my friends. Tonight, we celebrate the union of the king and queen. We celebrate the future of Anima! Feast, and remember all that we have to be grateful for!"

They cheered again, and then Sung urged Joyce to take a seat.

"I hope you have an appetite," he grinned, eyes twinkling. "Because tonight we feast!"

He had not been joking when he told her they would be feasting. Platter after platter of rich meats, juicy fruits, and odd but delicious vegetables passed the table, and Joyce tried all of

Laurie Bowler

them. When things slowed, she wondered if she could even walk back to the cave; she was so stuffed. But the food was all so delicious, fresh and tasty, she had not been able to stop.

It was fun to have Sung smiling and feeding her grapes. It was fun to have the women from the council at a table in front of them, all winking and laughing together, throwing teasing jabs at the couple. Fun to have Talia next to her and her sister, both gushing over her dress. And Sung's eyes...

His eyes rarely left her for more than a few seconds. His name would be called, or someone would visit the table, and he would turn. But every time Joyce looked at him, he would look back. Or she would feel his gaze like a finger touch on her skin and turn, and he would be staring, his eyes dark, alight at the same time. It stole her breath.

Then his hand snuck to her knee under the table. She pretended to ignore it, but as Talia turned and asked her where she got the dress, Sung was sliding the skirt up. Up her leg until he found the skin of her knee and thigh and stayed there. Her breath picked up. She got flustered, trying to explain to Talia which merchant they had visited to find the dress.

Then Sung leaned into her ear again and whispered. "Are you ready? First, we do speeches, and then we leave. And I am locking the cave door behind us this time."

Joyce snorted the water she was drinking and had to cough. When she spluttered her way back to dignity, Sung was still staring, his eyes ablaze and locked on hers.

"Let us get this done," she whispered, and his fingers tightened on her leg.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Companions

SUNG

Every time he stroked her thigh, letting his fingertips trail along her skin, the tiny hairs of her legs stood on end, and her skin prickled under his touch. The mating huff rose in his throat. He'd had to swallow it a dozen times already. He was swallowing and scenting like an adolescent at his first mating. It would have been embarrassing, but there were so many people and so much going on that he trusted that most were not taking the time to single out his scent. He prayed they were not.

Though it made him grow frustrated, he was almost glad when Erwin stood beside him and called for quiet. He was forced to take his hand off her, which helped immensely with his concentration but less with the fire that urged him to touch, taste, and fill his nose with her. He did not want to think about anything else.

"Good people of Anima, we celebrate our new queen tonight and the beginning of a new dawn in the Wildwood." Many voices were raised cheerfully, and Sung was proud of the woman beside him. "Tonight," Erwin continued. "We start the journey into the age of King Gareth and his good Queen Joyce and their cubs that will lead Anima in the coming generations," Erwin turned and smiled at them both. "Queen Joyce, your people would like to hear from you. Are you ready to answer to your court, to your people?"

"I will do my best," she said, and Sung's heart squeezed. She was so uncertain of herself; could she not see her strength. He resolved? to do better to remind her of it, show her how she appeared in his eyes.

Erwin nodded. "Would you address the people and tell them your hopes for this new phase of our kingdom?"

Joyce stood, wiping her hands on her skirts and smiling at the people. "I am... I'm grateful that you have accepted me," she said, her voice clear as a bell across the market. "I am so grateful to have Sung and that he chose me -" Sung's hand twitched toward her, and he

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could feel his eyes shining as she met his gaze. There was an audible murmur of emotion and approval through the crowd. Joyce tore her gaze away and looked back at the gathered people. "This is a new life for me. I ask your forgiveness for anything I may have done or said that offended you. I have not learned all the customs yet. I am working on learning, and I will do better. But I appreciate your forgiveness until I find my way. I am looking forward to the opportunity to serve you as queen."

There was a great roar of approval that shocked her. Her eyes went wide when the cheers began. She turned to Sung, who only smiled and raised his hands in applause. She put her hand to her chest, nodded at them, and then sat. But Sung shook his head and urged her to stand again.

"You still have to name your cohorts," he said.

She nodded and stood again as Erwin motioned for the people to quiet.

"Queen Joyce," he called. "Will you name your second?"

Joyce swallowed and recited the words from memory. "I will, as my stead. I choose Khloe of the pride."

Khloe stood and bowed her acceptance to Joyce, and another great whoop of approval went up from the people, and Sung nodded. It was an excellent choice. He had not wanted to mould her decisions but hoped the women's council had not chosen for her. He should have asked her before, dammit.

Erwin smiled and settled the people again. "And your heart's companion? Do you have a sister to name?" he intoned.

"Yes. I ask Talia of the wing to stand with me and weather the storms," she said clearly and smiled at her friend.

Talia's eyes widened, but she shot out of her chair and took Joyce's hand, bowing over it. Joyce tried to stop her, but Sung was glad the woman treated her more intimately. He had known they would be a good fit, but Talia had seemed hesitant before the mating.

Erwin adjusted his leather sash and then opened his hand to the masses. "And the last of your people, who will you choose to advise?"

Anima

Joyce smiled, confidence showing on her face for the first time since this started. Sung looked into the crowd, wondering which female the council had pointed Joyce towards.

“I would ask my advisor to be... Gray of the Thunder Herd,” she said, loud and strong. “He who listens to the wind can speak with me and help me hear the people's hearts.”

Sung froze.

A murmur rose among the adults as a small group of young people cheered, shouted at the back of the market square, and started pushing a young equine to his feet, who stared in clear shock even as he bowed and mouthed his acceptance. Sung squinted at the youth. He only knew Gray for his unfortunate deformity, one he had discussed with Erwin several times. Sung looked at his friend, who stood next to him and was trying and failing to hide his shock. This time, there was almost no applause but a great deal of muttered words and whispers that made Sung sweat.

He knew... he knew what she doing. He knew what she intended. But they could not see it. A queen had not had a male advisor since; had it ever happened? He would have to ask Khloe. But worse, a deformed Anima? A man none were sure of and so young? He trusted Joyce's sense of the man, but she had no idea what a fox she had thrown among the chickens. His dear, sweet girl.

As his stomach churned, he prayed that when the time came, the people would choose to see her for her heart and stop judging her for her differences.

Laurie Bowler

SUNG

Sung sat back in his chair, offering her a smile of reassurance when she turned to look at him, uncertain because of the cold reception to her announcement. She licked her lips nervously as she turned back to them, but he watched her eyes turn steely, her back straighten, and his smile grew.

She had no idea what she had done. But they had no idea whom they were dealing with. Joyce, his little hero, was going to show them. And he would help her do it.

Erwin cleared his throat and drew everyone's attention. The tension in the room had risen several notches, and Sung swallowed as Erwin made the final call to their queen.

"Tell us, Queen Joyce, what passion resides in you? To what end will your cohorts serve? To what fate will you throw your favour?"

Joyce raised her chin and, for the first time, did not follow the traditional script. That meant she knew what she was about to say did not fit. Sung was half-proud and half-terrified.

"I am your queen, but I am also human, raised in a different world, created for a different purpose. I wish to make Anima my home and become the people's representative," she said, determined to be heard. "But to do that, I believe I must represent everyone in Anima and use my position and my unique background to favour the plight of the unseen, the discarded and the shunned. I wish to champion those who are also different and forced to walk a different path, either by creation or fate. I will be the champion of the people without a voice and the children who stand outside the... the pack," she finished, stumbling on the unfamiliar term.

This time, the people's response was confusion. Generally, the queen chose a form of trade or the arts to patronise. They were unfamiliar with her choice of a corner of the people. But Sung, remembering his own time in her world where he stuck out as someone so different, viewed with such suspicion, applauded, once again, her intention. He just wished his people could see her as he did.

No one seemed quite sure what to do. Usually, at this point, the master of ceremonies would invite representatives of chosen trade forward to accept the queen's favour. Not only

Anima

was it inappropriate to ask the shunned to the stage, but even naming them would add to their shame. Erwin looked at him, a pleading in his eyes. And Sung stood quickly, taking Joyce's hand.

"I charge you, Anima, to take the favour of your queen: Long live queen Joyce, the compassionate!"

"Long live queen Joyce, the compassionate!" came the callback, but once again, punctuated by murmurs, whispers, shaken heads, and frowns.

Returning to the ordinary course of events, Erwin invited the cohorts to the podium table, where they would be asked to eat from now on. With Talia already there as a master weaver and Khloe only one table below, the people's attention was drawn to Gray, who was forced to weave through the entire market to reach the stage.

Sung had to nod in approval when the young man kept his head up and chin high, refusing to meet the eyes of those who scowled or muttered as he passed. He had a spine, no matter what people might think of the queen's advisor. Which Sung appreciated. He was going to need it.

When the young man made it to the stage, he approached Sung first, his scent shaky but clear-headed.

"Sire, I did not know. I would have told her -"

"Hush, son. Your queen has given you great honour."

"Yes, but I did not ask; I need you to know I did not know she meant to -"

"Soldier, stand too!" Erwin snapped from beside him, and Gray snapped his mouth closed and stood, chin up and eyes on his herd Leader. "You were not chosen by the king or by me. The queen gave you this honour; you will respect her choice and show her the honour of your gratitude that she is due."

"Of course, of course," Gray said, his eyes pained. He believed the king or his leader would be displeased with him. And while Sung was not excited about his wife's primary advisor being male and a young male at that, he certainly was not going to express that here, in front of the people. So, he smiled at the youth, barely more than a colt and indicated that he should approach Joyce.

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Gray turned, his eyes shining, and went down on a knee in front of Joyce, who covered her mouth.

“Gray, you do not need to -”

“You have honoured me above what I deserve, majesty,” he said through his teeth as though he fought tears. “I am humbled and grateful. And I will serve you with my life.”

“Of course, you will, of course,” she said, trying to get him to stand. “Please, Gray, you do not have to do this -”

He stood, his jaw tight and eyes bright, then positioned himself to Joyce’s right and slightly behind, demonstrating his submission to her will to the people. She kept trying to turn and talk to him, but Sung took her hand and brought her back to face him, whispering in her ear.

“This is a time to let him appear as a servant to your expectations. But let the people see him follow you, as they should,” he whispered.

Joyce nodded and looked at him, squeezing his hand, then turned back to the people with him, her cohorts all surrounding her.

“Good people of Anima,” he boomed to the meeting. “Celebrate your queen and her cohort. She has chosen from among you, and from among you, she will rule!”

This cheer was at least more enthusiastic than the last couple. Sung prayed it was not because they were glad it was all over. Then, as the music began again and the voices of people rose in an excited babble, he turned to face her, forcing a smile.

“Well done, beautiful,” he said, winking.

“I don’t think they liked my choice in the end,” she said with a sad glance back over the crowd. “I am so disappointed. I thought... I thought maybe all the suspicion was over. But...”

“Don’t worry about it, Love,” Sung said.

Erwin grunted beside him, but he pointedly ignored his second and embraced Joyce before turning her to her cohort.

“They follow you now,” he said, flinging his breath in her ear. “Tell them you will speak tomorrow and that they should not disturb you tonight during your rest.”

She glanced at him from the side, her cheeks heating, and nodded.

Anima

He smiled and let his hand brush her ass, praying no one could see it from the other side of the table. But some of him went cold as she turned to her people and gathered them to make a plan.

Would the creator not give her a break?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Something Special

JOYCE

As it turned out, the feast was not over. She had thought their speeches and her choices were the ends of the night. But it was only the end of the formal traditions. Once, she had arranged to meet with Talia, Khloe, and Gray the following morning. They had taken their seats at the podium table; she turned back to Sung, still feeling shaky at the response from the people. But he had ignored the tension and taken her mind.

“May I have this dance?” he said, his eyebrows up.

Joyce blinked. “Dance?”

Music played, but she did not notice any dancing until Sung nodded towards the crowd. She saw that the people had moved the tables back to the edges of the centre of the market. Now, they all sat or stood around while couples and individuals began to leap and sway in the dirt at the centre.

Joyce loved to dance, but she was not very good at it. And she had never seen dancing quite like this. There was a group of six women at one end of the space, stomping and swaying in a combination of steps they took in unison. They were beautiful and graceful, and they leapt like gazelles at one point, so high that Joyce’s breath caught.

There was a couple in the centre of the wolves, she thought, who danced more akin to what she thought looked like Salsa in her world. It is a sensual and powerful play between two bodies, a chord of tension that promises satisfaction at its end. Her skin tingled, watching them.

Then there were groups and couples scattered about, some simply swaying in a way that reminded her of home high school dances. Others engaged in some kind of give and take that seemed to depict a story, perhaps a battle between the people facing each other.

Joyce was enthralled and confused. “I... I do not know how to do that, Sung,” she said, her disappointment evident in her tone.

“Let me show you. Please,” he said, and his voice was husky, making her turn to look at him.

Anima

That loop around her heart snagged tight and pulled her towards him as she nodded and took his hand. He led her down the stairs and into the centre of the dance area. At first, she just watched everyone around her, her mouth open in shock and delight. But then Sung offered a hand and bowed, and she took it and bowed back to him.

Pulling her in so that their hips were almost pressed together, his left hand at her lower back, his right clasping her left, he leaned into her ear. "Just relax and let me lead."

She gave him a look. "I have just been made queen, apparently offended half the people with my choices, and I have never danced in public before... but sure, Sung. I will just relax."

He lifted one eyebrow with a lopsided grin. "Someone's feeling her power already."

She shook her head. "No, but I am feeling something," she said in a low voice, letting the fingers of her right hand trail down his neck and shoulder. He growled and nipped at her ear.

"Careful, or you will force me to carry you out of here and back to the cave," he whispered.

She tipped her head back, her eyes sparkling. "Promise?"

Sung swung her into the dance rhythm with a snarl of frustrating joy. Joyce found herself giddy because the most challenging part was done, and now she was touching him, and she was in a pretty dress.

After a few circuits of the dance floor, she could just let go. Despite his massive size, Sung was a graceful and precise dancer. His strength made every shift and step seem powerful despite the care and elegance he gave it. At first, mocking her lack of ability, she had sagged melodramatically back over his arm.

"Do with me as you will, Sire. I am but a peasant to your throne!" she mock-swooned.

But Sung dropped his face to her neck and snarled against it. "Do not bare your neck to me in public! You will bring me to my knees in front of them!" Yet, he tasted her throat as if he shouldn't but couldn't resist.

Joyce was confused and lifted her head to stare at him; his eyes were warm but dark, and his chest rose and fell quickly. She did not think it was because of the dancing.

Which was when she realised they were dancing. He had moved her backwards and forwards extended her away from his body, and brought her back close. She lacked his grace

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and finesse but found the rhythm he followed and let herself be led. And lead, he did, spinning and swaying with her, wrapping her waist in his arm, then turning her, so her skirt swirled around her knees. He caught her against his chest, spun her back out and grabbed her again. Around and around, until all she saw was his eyes, always on her, and his shoulders, always there to steady her.

She had no idea how long they danced, but it was as if the cord between them pulled tighter with each step, and her heart swelled more.

Sung's eyes locked on hers, and the world tunnelled around them.

Joyce knew they were still in the market, still watched by hundreds of people, but as the people of the Wildwood began to unwind and enjoy themselves, so did Sung and Joyce. Then, the music slowed.

Sung stopped spinning her, rolling her in and out of his body. Stopped turning them and crossed the floor.

He dropped his chin so his cheek brushed hers and brought her hand up, curling his around it and pressing it to his chest, and they swayed. Joyce's heart and body were at odds, her body acutely aware of his warmth, his strength of him, his beauty. Her heart wanted to race, and her body wanted to move. Her skin wanted to ripple against his.

But her heart... she was touched by his gentleness, the tenderness with which he brushed her temple with his lips, or the way he pulled her close to his side when there was an unidentified noise on the dancefloor. He watched to ensure she was safe before returning to her and bringing her close to sway again.

Every move he made seemed to centre on her, and she was awed by it, by the heart of him. This man, this king!

What was it in him that held her like she was something precious?

"You smell confused," he murmured in her ear. He took the hand from her back and stroked it through her hair. "What is wrong?"

This scent thing was very inconvenient! Joyce almost told him not to worry about it, but she knew he would only watch her more closely in the end, probably misreading the problem. So, she made a little face as she tipped her head back to meet his eyes.

Anima

“I am just not sure why you treat me like I’m... special.” It was the plain truth. She tried not to back away from it.

His brows pressed in. “Because you are special, Joyce, so special. The most special.”

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

She sighed.

“You know that makes no sense, right?” she said. When he opened his mouth to argue, she shook her head. “No, I’m serious, Sung. I’m not looking for reassurance here. I believe you, and I love it. I love that you act like I’m... precious. But you must know, from my perspective, it makes no sense. You have more strength and power, and you have more knowledge. You are older than me and more beautiful. We are... unequally matched, but I don’t doubt you care. I just do not understand why.”

He stared down at her, using one finger to press a thin strand of hair back behind her ear as he spoke, his voice little more than a whisper.

“When I was a cub – a child, I was very sure of myself,” he said carefully. “I had always been treated as if I was more valuable than everyone else. When that happens, and you are young, you just believe it. It is simply the way the world is.” She nodded and didn’t say those children usually became complete brats. “But when I was taken to your world,” he said tightly. “I was suddenly nothing. Not in my home. My guardians knew who I was and how I should be cared for. But the world... the world did not see a normal person. They saw a troubled child and... had no time for him. I only lasted at school for six weeks before my guardians pulled me out since human education had only been part of our cover anyway.”

“I don’t remember you at school!”

He shook his head. “I was miserable, and I stayed miserable until I met you,” he said, holding her gaze again, his brown eyes warm yet troubled. “I was so angry and so scared, though I would not admit it. I had never in my life felt like I was... less than others. Being away from my family and pride was terrifying, being in a world that was so different and unforgiving. And being friendless... I was desperately unhappy. Then you walked over to me that day as if I were someone and started talking to me about tigers. Do you remember that?”

She smiled. “Barely; I just remember seeing you standing in the driveway of your house, looking angry.”

“I was trying to learn to ride a bicycle. It was not going well,” he muttered, and she grinned at his obvious discomfort in admitting that. “When you started talking to me, I almost snapped

Anima

at you. As soon as I spoke, I assumed you would decide I was scary or weird, as everyone else had. I would be alone again, and I was already feeling bad about myself.”

“I always found you fascinating,” she said, shrugging. “Back then, I could never figure out why other people were so wary of you.”

He nodded. “You see... your heart. You never judged me as others did. Even back then and later, when we were friends and I did strange things, you always just acted like they were normal or laughed like they did not matter.”

“They didn’t.”

“That is what makes you special, Joyce,” he said, and his voice had a tightness that matched the intensity in his eyes. “I thought the others here, my people, weren’t seeing you as I do. But I see. You do not see yourself that way. You have no idea how precious you are,” she shook her head and looked away, but he returned her chin and made her face him. “Joyce, do you think I chose you in the right, that I married you in the ceremony that brought you here to my people out of what...?”

“Pity,” she said immediately. “I know you like me, Sung; I know you are attracted to me. But are you choosing me for this? To be a queen? That has to be because you felt bad that they brought me here.”

He snarled, and his hand curled at her back.

“I would not let others speak of you that way, so I will not allow you to do it either,” he snapped. “I told you that pity does not drive me -”

“I know, I know -”

“You do not.”

“I just... if you were in my world, Sung... the words they would use are out of my league. That is what people would say about you; they would say that you were too good for me. And in my world, they would be right.”

“Just further evidence that you were meant to be here,” he growled, fire in his eyes. “I see why the creator brought you.”

Joyce smiled softly. “Do me a favour,” she said after a moment.

“Anything.”

Laurie Bowler

“Don’t ever change, Sung. Don’t ever stop thinking the way you think. These people adore you, and so do I because you are good.”

He blinked, and his chest swelled. He looked for a moment as if he might argue with her, but instead, he took her face in his hands and kissed her slowly, softly.

“It takes one to know one,” he whispered, pulling her against his chest with a happy sigh.

They clung to each other and continued to sway. They kissed and continued to sway. Sung pulled away, staring into her eyes, and Joyce’s heart beat faster. As the moment's emotion weighed on her, so did the growing heat in his eyes.

His iron strength under her hands made Joyce’s mouth dry, and she wished they were alone. The lights in the market dimmed. The sound of the crowd around them faded. Joyce’s heart began to race when his breathing deepened, and his hand slid low on her back. Then his chest brushed her breasts softly, teasing, bringing her nipples to peaks under the light fabric of the dress. His eyes widened, and he manfully dragged them back up to meet hers.

The music slowed even more, and he pulled her in closer, pulling her hands up around his neck and urging her to clasp them behind him. He let his hands slide down her sides to hold her at the hips as the music changed and began to pulse. The beat of the drums became the new rhythm for her body, breathing, the rolling of her hips and the feel of his cheek against hers, the shuffle of their feet.

Everything became tied together, and their bodies met in the middle. Her skin prickled in anticipation as one of his hands lifted to find hers behind his neck, then trailed down her arm to her side, his thumb finding the side of her breast as he followed his thumb down to her ribs, her waist, and lower. Joyce was beginning to pant. Sung’s eyes never left hers.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The Dance

SUNG

His skin prickled with desire as he stared into her wide eyes, and she stared back. He let the music move him, move them, sliding step, sliding step, to a pause. She got the rhythm quickly, but he could tell her mind was not on it. He wondered if she felt what he felt in the slide of her dress against the chest of his shirt. The whip of her skirt against his legs. The brush of their legs when they moved thigh against thigh. Warmth and pressure where they pressed, and cool prickling desire where his skin ached for hers.

He returned one hand to her wrist and moved it to where his shoulder met his neck. He trailed his fingers down her arm, raising goosebumps under his touch as he slid down to her side, along the outside of her breast, then around her ribs to put the flat to his hand across her lower back. Her jaw had slackened, but she did not say a word, just held onto his neck and let herself move into him, be led, be swayed, be pressed.

She did not blink, but her breath got louder as he rolled his hips into each step, her eyes glazed.

Then he dropped his chin so his cheek was almost touching hers. He felt her hair tickle his neck and jaw, but his skin prickled and tingled instead of laying his cheek to hers, waiting for the contact that never came. He felt the electric crackle at her closeness, the flutter of her breath on his collarbone where his shirt was open. Unable to resist, he gave in with a groan, nuzzled her ear, and nipped at the side of her neck. She went limp in his arms, and her breath quickened, but he kept leading, swinging her slowly around the floor.

Their eyes locked again when he straightened.

He was in awe. Slack-jawed and speechless at the beauty of her, the beauty she could not see in herself, the beauty that lit his world.

For a moment, his mind fell back to those dark days of his childhood when the only sun he saw was her smile. The way she had looked at him like he was the amazing one and followed

Laurie Bowler

him anywhere he would go. When the only rush in his world was to hear her calling his name. To the warmth and gratitude he had felt whenever she had defended his strange ways.

“You always came with me,” he whispered.

She blinked then but did not stop staring at him. “What? When?” she whispered back.

“When we were little. You never even used to ask. I would just show up at your door, and you would come out and follow me.”

She smiled. “Because I knew I was safe with you,” she said, cupping his neck with her hand. “And I knew wherever you were going was where I wanted to be.”

He lifted one hand to draw her hair back from her face. “Do you still feel that way?” he asked.

“Even more than back then,” she breathed. “Sung... I... thank you. I know it’s hard sometimes, but... I feel like you have given me a new life. As well as your heart and I’m just... I’m stunned. I do not know what I did to deserve you, but I am so glad you are here.”

A wave of love rolled over him, stealing his breath. How was it possible that she was here and his? And... grateful? He was the grateful one. He did not have words, so he put his hand to her jaw and drew her up into a kiss that started softly but quickly flared into a feast of lips, tongues, and rushing breath.

He had to force himself to remember where they were, break it, and not paw her in front of the children and mothers. And men, for that matter, but he yearned. He did not want to be here anymore. He loved his people, but not as much as he loved her.

“Joyce...”

How do you even tell her?

“I know,” she breathed and pulled him down into another kiss that was little more than her open mouth on his, lips barely moving, tongues only teasing. “I know,” she whispered again into his mouth.

He sucked in and pulled her into his chest, and she rippled under his hands, her head dropping forward to rest on his collarbone as if it was all just a little bit too much.

He knew the feeling; he did. Unable to show her how he felt, he began dancing with her like he would an Anima, a slow but demanding roll and slide that mimicked the kind of roll and

Anima

slide he wanted. She gasped when his hips rolled into hers again, and then she just... gave up. Their eyes were bright with desire, and her pupils so big her eyes looked black in the half-light. And even though she did not know the dance, she was so loose in his arms that she fell into it. They moved as if she were an extension of his body. And her breath quickened, her skin pebbled, and she swallowed. And she never took her eyes off his.

“Sung?” she asked breathlessly.

“Yes?” he croaked

“When can we go home?”

“When... what?”

“When can we go home?” she said quickly, lightly. He was pierced; she had no idea she had called his home her own. That she had accepted him, adopted his world. Taken over his heart.

His childhood dream had walked into his world and owned him.

He answered her by stepping her backwards, walking her in time to the rhythm and weaving through the couples and groups around them to those who had gathered to watch from the sides of the market. When they reached the crowd's edge, he dropped all pretence of dancing, took her hand, and pulled her through. He acknowledged the greetings and calls of the people with a wave or a short smile but never stopped in his path towards the trail home and never let his grip on her hand slip even an inch.

Chapter Thirty

The Forest at Night

SUNG

As they left the feast to return home, Sung pushed away thoughts of the next day. It would bring challenges, he knew. But she was so fragile, needing much reassurance... they would meet those questions when they came. For now, he wanted to show her how much she meant, and he wanted her.

When they stepped out of the market and walked the city trail, he looked down at her and realised her beauty shone in the lantern light. Her dress flowed around her like water, clinging to her curves and rippling on her skin, reminding him of their time together in the pools the previous night. But she was devastatingly beautiful in the moonlight.

But through the market and out into the tree city, and through the square, there were people everywhere! And they all wanted to call to their king and queen, stop and chat, or bow and wave. Sung's teeth were gritted before they even reached the city square. He almost snarled when he thought they were finally free to start down the darkened path to their cave, and someone else called out.

Amused by his growing tension, Joyce put a hand to his arm and met his eyes as he turned too quickly, with a too-obvious frown, to greet the man jogging up behind them. So, his wife graciously accepted the man's congratulations, smiled, and thanked him. His wife squeezed his arm to remind him to say something. His wife expertly excused them from the conversation, leaving the man smiling but with no temptation to follow them into the forest.

And then, finally, thank the creator, they were alone. She clung to his arm, a small smile on her face that made him want to ask her what she was thinking, but he was too busy strategising. If he waited five minutes, they would be back at the cave. With the guard no doubt shadowing them through the trees right now, Joyce would be more comfortable.

But that meant he had to wait five more minutes, and Sung found his patience at an end, so with a quick scan of the forest, he wrapped an arm around her waist and swung her into the trees alongside the path.

Anima

“Sung, what?”

But he had her against the tree trunk, pinning her from knee to chest, and his lips on hers before she could say more. His breath thundered, his heart pounding in his ears. She sighed, and her hands slid up his chest in a way that made him groan and deepen the kiss, then drop to kiss along her jaw, to that little space under her ear that always gave her goosebumps when he nibbled... right there.

With a shuddering breath, she dropped her head back against the tree and whispered his name.

He hummed but could not stop tasting her, dragging his lips and teeth lower as she arched back.

“Gareth?” She whispered her hands in his hair.

“Yes...” he murmured against her skin, then sucked.

She drew in a sharp breath. “Why...” she seemed to lose her train of thought when he found the spot where her shoulder met her neck; at the same time, his hand slid up to cup her breast through the thin fabric of the dress, but then she swallowed and kept going. “Why did you tell me not to bare my throat... to you in public?” she asked, pulling him in tighter.

He lifted his head to kiss her mouth, the slide of her tongue like fuel to his fire, and he almost forgot the question. But then she groaned and pressed in to kiss his neck with lips, tongue, and teeth.

Sung huffed and did not care how many of the guards heard it. “The throat...” he gasped as she pushed her hands under his vest, her fingers trailing along his sides until the combination of arousal and tickling threatened to undo him. He sucked in hard and caught her hands, pulling them out from under his clothes, then smiling as he raised them over her head, holding her wrists in one of his large hands.

He pulled back enough to watch her face, measure her for displeasure or uncertainty, but she smiled as he pinned her wrists to the tree above her, forcing her chest up and out, her breasts peaking beneath the white fabric. Tingles washed over him in a wave, and he groaned, uncertain which part of her to taste first. He was still staring, open-mouthed, when she spoke, her voice husky.

Laurie Bowler

“Sung? The throat?” she said, her eyes twinkling when he met her gaze. He knew she giggled because his own was so damned blank with lust.

He blinked and let his free hand drag down her side as he dove for her collarbones and explained with his lips and tongue against her skin. “The throat...” he repeated as he dragged his lips along her collarbone, “... is the most vulnerable part on an Anima’s body,” he inhaled her scent which was musky and dark with her desire, and he huffed again. “To bare your throat to anyone is the ultimate act of trust; Anima does it very rarely, usually only with a true, lifetime mate.”

Her breath caught, and he lifted his head to meet her gaze. Had he frightened her? Hurt her? But no, her eyes were and alight... with joy?

“You let me kiss your neck,” she breathed. And when he nodded, she closed her eyes and dropped her head back again, offering herself. “I will always give you my throat, Sung,” she breathed, arched her back as she was, with her hands above her head and tipped back; her body was an altar, an offering.

And Sung planned to worship it.

His entire body tightened. Sung let a growl putter in his throat as he dropped to taste her throat again, as lightly as he could, open-mouthed, his tongue flat against the divot between her collarbones. And he huffed the mating call, letting it resonate in his chest.

The poor guards were forced to hear and scent this to keep her safe while also not getting close enough to be a threat and anger their king... if he had not been so blinded with lust, he would have laughed at what he was putting them through.

Sung kissed her, his free hand resting on her back, which arched away from the tree. She whimpered when he pulled her in tighter against the broad planes of his stomach. His growing arousal was plain, even through his leather pants. As their tongues tangled, she writhed against him.

Then, a twig snapped somewhere far away, and Sung froze. As he realised what he was doing, pawing at her, taking her here in the dark where she could not see, but all the guards were forced to, he also realised she would not like it if she knew.

Anima

With a frustrated groan, he pulled away, panting. Her head came up, and her eyes opened.

“What? What is wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong,” he said, letting her hands go from above her head. “I just want to get you into the cave.”

The concern on her face slowly morphed into a smile as he stepped back and offered her his hand.

Five minutes would not kill him... much.

But as if she felt the same way, she set the pace back to the cave much faster than they had been walking before.

She did not see the shadows of the men around them as they walked the path; she looked for them when they finally stepped into the clearing, and he could smell the dip in her when she realised they had been there all along. Cursing himself for an inconsiderate ass, he kissed her hand and kissed her knuckles.

“Come, wife,” he whispered, drawing her into the cave. “I have something to show you.”

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

As he opened the cave door, she hugged his back and let her hands slide over his shoulders and back to her favourite part of him. Something burned in her chest, not just desire. Something more, a demand for him. But...she also felt driven to touch him. It was just not a want; it was a need. He rippled under her touch. He closed the door behind them and barred it by picking up a thick beam she had not paid attention to, which had been lying up against the wall inside and then dropped it onto two brackets on the door. Joyce grinned; it looked like god himself would not be opening that door.

Sung turned to face her and stood there... staring. The lantern light was warm and made his chest and stomach muscles glow where his vest was open. Joyce swallowed hard and stroked a finger down the centre of his chest, then his muscled stomach sucked in as she went and hooked it into the top of his pants.

He just stared at her. "What's next?" he rasped.

"Take off your jacket," she said, quivering when one side of his mouth slipped up. At the same time, he slowly, very slowly, shrugged the vest off his shoulders, then drew it down one arm, then the other, tossing it onto a side table and taking a step towards her. But she took a step back, and his eyebrow went up, and he waited.

Joyce watched him for a moment, then let her eyes slide down his body to where her finger was still hooked behind his belt in the waistband of his pants. She tilted her head, and Sung huffed again, the sound twangling something low in her belly.

Anima

SUNG

"I do like it when you make that noise," she said breathlessly. He did it again, and she shivered. "It is like you are calling something out of me."

"It is the mating call," he said, his voice even deeper than usual. "It says you are mine, and I want you and every other man who hears it better to stay the fuck away from you."

She laughed, and her eyes flicked up to meet his. Her pupils were so big that her eyes looked almost black. Sung swore and stepped towards her, but she stepped back again, her smile growing.

He growled. "Playing games so soon?"

She shook her head. "I just want to see you this time, in the light."

Sung shuddered at that and had to clench his hands into fists to stop himself from reaching for her. Creator's Light! She wanted to see him.

"Tell me what to do," he rasped. "Anything, I will do it."

Her mouth dropped slightly, but she closed it, bit her lip, and pulled her hand away, looking at the place where it had been just a moment before. Trembling, Sung stared at her so intently that the world began to narrow.

"Take off your pants," she said breathlessly.

Sung did not need to be asked a second time. With a soft grunt and a couple of sharp tugs, he had the belt slapping free and his pants unbuttoned in seconds, shoving them down and stepping out of them, leaving his hands at his sides. Her eyes had not left his face yet.

He waited.

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed twice. He wondered if she knew he could hear her heart and see the shift in her breathing and how it sped up.

"You are so... gorgeous," she breathed, and her eyes widened as they drifted from his face and down, down, down.

Everything in him tightened under her gaze.

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

She had started this game almost as a joke. A way to tempt him, but she was very quickly trapped in her snare. She'd had to swallow twice before speaking when he had bared himself so boldly, shaking off his pants like they were a burden.

His body was a massive and sculpted work of art, every muscle visible and tightly hugged by his skin. His forearms were veined, and the tendons on his hands stood proud as he clenched his fists at his sides because he was working hard not to touch her, she knew, and she wanted him to, so badly. But something about making him wait, making herself wait... it was delicious.

Ignoring his very obvious arousal, because if she focused in that area, there would be no playing, and they would both be finished in seconds, she drank in the sight of his body. His thighs were round and broad; he stood with his feet shoulder-width apart, his skin almost glowing in the warm lantern light. She moved her eyes across his broad and heavily muscled shoulders, washboard stomach, and muscle lines from over his hips down into that perfect V as if it pointed the way to her pleasure.

His shoulders shifted up and down with his breath, and a slightly wild light appeared in his eyes.

He wanted her badly.

She bit her lip and groaned.

Anima

SUNG

“Joyce,” he pleaded. “Can I touch you?”

She shook her head, her lip pressed between her teeth, her eyes still following the lines of his chest and shoulders until he felt it like a finger on his skin.

“I want to touch you first,” she whispered.

Sung had to close his eyes briefly, or he would do something stupid. He dropped his head and tried to count to ten, reminding himself that she was new to this and he should not push. Then he sucked in hard because she began to circle him, her fingers starting at his navel, trailing along the side of his stomach, then around. She walked slowly around him, letting her touch drift across his body. She traced the lines of his back and pressed a soft kiss to the centre of his spine, between his shoulder blades. He groaned again and clenched his hands so tightly that his nails threatened to cut his palms.

She swallowed again when she walked a complete circle around him, and her eyes were alight with lust.

“Show me your throat, Sung,” she whispered.

Sung’s eyes rolled back, and a growl rolled in his throat as he dropped his head back, drunk with desire for her. He trembled from head to toe when she pressed against him and laid her mouth on his throat. He huffed when her fingers started from his chin and slowly moved over his Adam’s apple to the V between his collarbones, and her breathing sped up.

“I will never use this against you,” she said against his skin, then flicked her tongue out to lick his neck. Sung’s hands twitched towards her. “I will never hurt you with it or let anyone else have it. I want you to know that.”

Then her mouth was gone from his skin, but the rest of her remained. Sung still had his head dropped back, his breath tearing in and out of his throat.

Then she whispered. “Now you can touch me.”

Sung sucked in and raised his head, opening his eyes. When he saw her, her arms tight around him, her breasts pressed against his stomach, and her back arched so her head laid so far back that her throat was the highest point offered to him, he roared.

Chapter Thirty-One

Temptation

SUNG

The temptation to simply take her, quick and rough, right there, was overwhelming. He dove for her throat with lips, teeth, and tongue, and she pulled him in, her hands sliding everywhere she could reach. In his mind, he would have had her on the floor or against the wall and yanked that dress up ...

He shivered and made himself slow down. If he rushed this, he would regret it, he knew. She was playful tonight, gaining confidence. He had no doubt she would give in to a quick tumble, but he wanted more than frantic pawing.

He wanted to make love to her. With sheer will, he nipped her neck again and then pulled back.

She blinked her eyes open and pulled her head up to look at him, her eyes glazed with lust. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Nothing at all," he rumbled, his voice so deep it came from his toes. He brought a hand up to stroke her hair and down her back. "I just want to... take my time," he said, letting the heat he felt shine in his gaze.

Her lips pulled up into a smile. "That sounds like fun."

"If this is mere fun, you tell me, because I need to up my game," he growled, then took her mouth when she started to laugh. She was not laughing for long.

He cupped her jaw and tilted her head, taking her mouth, plunging and teasing with his tongue in a parody of what he wanted to be doing. Then, as she arched into his kiss, he let his hands slide down her body on top of that sweet dress, teasing and squeezing, enjoying each dip and valley until he made it to her thighs. Her breath got faster and louder, and it was music to his ears.

"I like you in a dress," he whispered as he slowly gripped the material, bunching it into his hands to draw it up and bare her skin inch by glorious inch.

Anima

"I love it too; I was so... excited -" she swallowed convulsively when he nuzzled under her ear, "when the ladies found it for me... oh!"

He finally found the hem of the skirt and drew it up until he had access to her skin. Letting one side go, he put his hand down the back of her thigh and felt her goosebumps under his touch.

"It is as if all of you rise to meet me." he groaned. "I love the way you respond to me," he said, hoarse with love and desire.

"Everything in me, Sung," she breathed. "Everything."

Then, slowly, he changed direction, drawing his hand back up the inside of her thigh. It was a delightful shock when, instead of discovering the soft barrier of underclothes, his fingers found her heat, found her ready and eager for him. She sucked in as he groaned her name.

"It is a good thing you did not tell me you were completely bare under that dress, Joyce," he rasped into her mouth. "I would have scandalised the entire city, taking you there on the dancefloor."

"Next time," she gasped. "I will tell you... but I would not... let you... do anything about it until... we are home...."

He huffed the mating call, and she left her head drop back, eyes closed as he palmed her, letting his fingers slide into her gently at first, though she trembled with it. But then gave himself leave to press and slide until she started to twitch and brought a hand up to brace on his shoulder.

"So, fucking beautiful," he rasped, "Creator's light, I love you, Joyce."

Before she could respond, he took her mouth, which had dropped open as she leaned further back, searching for contact with him in that perfect spot. She whimpered and grabbed for him, but he smiled and denied her. He revelled in the flush of her cheeks and the rush of her panting breath, the way she went tense and still the closer he got to that bundle of nerves that promised her bliss.

Seeing her there, bare and ready, aching and seeking him, his body reached for her, yearning for release. He gritted his teeth against the urge to lift her onto himself and take her right there.

As her breath shortened and she started to hold it with each slide, he groaned and pulled his hand up to cup her naked ass. She whimpered her disappointment, but he was already walking

Laurie Bowler

her back towards the wall until he could press her into it, balance her weight, pull up her skirt, and clasp one of her legs behind the knee to lift it and slide himself against her softness.

She cried out as a guttural groan tore out of his throat, and for a moment, he could not even think. His entire life existed only in that delicious, tingling slide where they were connected. Her mouth was a round O, and as he rolled his hips, he took her lips, showing her with his tongue everything he would do to her, everything he wanted. Then he kissed down her throat, letting his teeth drag against the column of her neck, and she shivered, clinging to his shoulders, her cries becoming frantic.

“Please... Sung...” she begged shamelessly. “Please...”

“Soon, my love, soon,” he croaked, then kissed her. Rolling against her relentlessly, refusing to let her increase the pace.

But then, she shuddered, and he realised she was already close, and the thought unravelled his control. He had to stop or risk ruining it all by exploding all over her before he even took her. He froze, and she went still, both of them panting. She combed her fingers through his hair, clawing into his scalp in a stroke that should have been nothing next to where else they touched, but it felt glorious and sent shivers down his spine.

He opened his eyes and found her staring at him, both still panting.

“Please, Sung,” she said, a desperate edge in her voice. “I want you inside me.”

Anima

JOYCE

Sung had one arm under her knees, the other behind her shoulders; he swept her off her feet and into his chest, his breath heaving.

“There,” he said, nodding at a sideboard in an alcove as they walked past. “And there,” he huffed towards the bench seat before the fire. “Also, there and maybe on the counter, too,” he said as they passed the dining table.

“What are you doing?” she giggled as he buried his nose in her neck and inhaled deeply like she was some kind of perfume.

“I told you, we have to make a list of all the places I am going to mate you,” he growled.

Joyce laughed, but her stomach trilled, pulling him closer, her breath speeding up as he kissed and sucked at her neck. It gave her goosebumps every time. She felt she understood why he had seemed so obsessed with her neck and was glad. He carried her through the long cave and back to the bedroom, not bothering with the door since he had locked the only entrance. But instead of immediately jumping on her, as she had assumed, he walked around the room, blowing out lanterns.

With only two left when she said. “Don’t blow out all of them,” he stopped, turning to her with a wicked smile.

“You want some light, Joyce?” She blushed but nodded. “What the lady wants, the lady gets,” he purred and started stalking her across the room. The roll of his shoulders and hips was much like the predator that ran through his blood, making it hard for her to breathe as she waited for him to reach her.

Already stark naked, he was utterly unashamed. She enjoyed seeing him in the dim light, where the shadows were more profound and rippled between his muscles. She licked her lips in nervous anticipation as he approached, but he stopped just out of reach, his eyes dark. She tore her gaze off his chest and met them.

“What is wrong?”

“It is my turn,” he purred.

Joyce blushed but smiled. “Your turn for what?” she asked and made herself stop gripping her skirts, raise her chin, put her shoulders back, and not shrink from what she knew he would

Laurie Bowler

ask. He took the last two steps to get close to her and trailed a finger up her arm, her shoulder, and then along to the neck of the dress. The embroidery around the neck and shoulders was beautiful but even more dramatic, with the drawstring in the neckline that gathered it up. Sung's finger trailed along the edge of it, to the front, just above and between her breasts, where it tied, leaving a small peephole at her cleavage.

"Untie it," he said hoarsely, his eyes never leaving her skin.

Joyce raised trembling fingers to the tie and pulled the ends until it fell away, leaving a V that dipped between her breasts. But the linen held, and a shadow passed over Sung's eyes when the dress did not shift. She reached for the neckline, intending to pull it further down for him, but he stopped her, his hands gently circling her wrists.

"No," he croaked. "Let me."

Joyce dropped her hands and watched his face as he gazed at her. His breathing was shallow and quick as he trailed his fingers from the shoulders along the dress's neckline, then pulled slowly apart until the dress pulled along the tie and fell under his hands. He pushed it back with gentle movements, barely touching her skin until it rested off both shoulders, barely clinging to the tops of her breasts, the heavy embroidery weighing it down until it threatened to slide off completely.

Sung swallowed, and Joyce stifled a breathless laugh at the pleading hunger on his face.

"So beautiful," he whispered. "Your skin is so white and so soft."

He leaned down to kiss her collarbone, open-mouthed, humming his approval on her skin. Joyce's eyes slid closed. But when she reached for him, he straightened again with a wicked gleam in his eye.

Without a word, he tilted his head and, with two fingers, caught the dress where it had fallen off her shoulder and tugged it slowly down on that side until one breast slid free and made a noise in his throat. Their eyes caught, and Joyce breathed, waiting to see what he would do.

"Do you want -" he started, but she interrupted him.

"I want whatever you want," she said with a breath.

Anima

Eyes dark, Sung knelt in front of her, his massive shoulders rolled forward as his hands took her ribs, and he dropped his mouth to the peak of her breast, sucking hard enough to send electric jolts to the apex of her thighs.

“Sung!” she gasped, grabbing his shoulders to steady herself but unable to resist leaning back to give him better access.

He pulled her close and held her with one hand splayed between her shoulder blades but stayed on one knee, his mouth worshipping her breast. In contrast, his other hand began to bunch the skirt around her knee, then her thigh, and then his hand was on her skin underneath the dress. He dragged his fingers slowly up her inner thigh, leaving trails of sensation like fireworks on her skin. His fingers dipped into her softest places, and Joyce shifted on her feet to help him find that delicious slide, whimpering when he did as the jolts from his mouth crackled through her to meet the jolts from his talented fingers.

“Joyce,” he breathed against her skin.

She was grasping his shoulders because her knees felt weak. She felt too self-conscious to find the words but too heated to deny the desire. She tugged the other side of the dress down her arm until both breasts were free, then gasped when he took the invitation, growling in his throat when she dropped her head back and leaned into his arm. Her entire body hummed like a tuning fork as his mouth sucked; his teeth grazed perfectly with the slide and plunge of his fingers. She could feel the glittering was beginning to build, which was beautiful. But she was hollow. She needed him inside her. Needed to move together with him.

“Sung,” she gasped.

He came off her breast with a faint pop. “Yes, my love?” he huffed.

Joyce groaned in her throat because he did not stop touching her with those bold, strong fingers despite lifting his head to look at her. A shiver ran through her, and her skin pebbled from her neck to her knees.

“I want you,” she said, her voice keener than intended.

“You will have me, love,” he whispered, kissing her breast, open-mouthed again. “You will always have me.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Just Let Go

SUNG

Sung groaned on her nipple, and she gasped again. Her breath came in short bursts that she held at the peak of each slide of his fingers, her hips beginning to undulate in time. He could tell she meant to say no, push him off, and let them join, but each new crest of the wave and jolt to her new core just sent her gasping to the next. His breath rushed against the skin of her stomach as he shuddered and dropped his forehead to her chest.

One of her knees wobbled, and she grabbed at his shoulders. "Sung, I -"

"I have you, Joyce; relax. Let go; I have you."

With a shiver, she leaned back into his hand, lifting one leg to hook around his waist, her voice breaking at each press. Sung pleaded with the creator to guide him; she was almost there... almost there.

Then Sung sucked her nipple into his mouth hard. She arched her back, eyes wide, unbreathing, as goosebumps washed over his skin in a wave. Then she cried his name, shaking and jerking, her knee giving out completely, but he caught her and swung her up against his chest, the mating call groaning from his throat as he lifted her and carried her to the sleeping platform behind her.

He did not give her time to come down from the rush; as her climax edged away and her breath sucked in, he lowered her to the furs, took himself in hand, and pushed in, roaring her name as his entire being came alive.

"Sung!" she cried, tightening around him in a second wave that left her gasping, panting, and threatening to steal his control completely. She clapped a hand to his neck, rolling her hips against him, mouth open, her voice keen. Sung gritted his teeth and rode out her climax until she could focus. "You are... that was..." she still panted as Sung took her mouth and invaded with his tongue in the same rhythm he rolled into her, and they both lost themselves to each other.

Hands stroked, tongues licked, teeth grazed; she clung to him and pulled him in, whimpering. He held her close and pressed deep, moaning her name, unable to think beyond the

Anima

need to drive deeper, to possess her. She had curled her legs around his hips at some point, and without thought for her relative inexperience, he hooked one of them forward, pressing her knee back almost to her chest, then rolling into her again. They both cried out, their heads dropping as the contact changed; Sung swore as a great shudder rocked through him. He fought not to let it end, but Joyce cupped his neck and pulled him down into a storm of kisses, and when she sucked on his tongue, the climax hit him at the base of his spine, and he bellowed it into her mouth.

His hips still pounding, but the rhythm was broken and disjointed, so he gasped her name.

“Joyce, my Joyce- love,” she arched under him, her hands in his hair until they finally slumped. Sung panted into her neck, gasping, holding her to him as he tried to remember his name. She shivered and clung, panting too, blinking away her delighted shock. “Holy -” he cut himself off, swearing. “Joyce, are you right?” He was horrified that he had lost himself, not considering taking it slowly for her.

But she snorted into his chest and kissed the space under his ear before she answered.

“Sung, I don’t think I have ever been better,” she said in a voice heavy with satisfied weariness.

Trying not to be smug, Sung shifted his weight onto one elbow to lean over and see her face. Her cheeks were flushed pink, and her hair flew wildly around her face like a golden halo. But she raised a hand to his face and beamed at him, nibbling at his chin when he did not kiss her immediately.

“If you promise to do that to me every day, I might never leave this cave,” she said, combing her fingers through his hair.

Sung’s smug smile grew, and he traced that line he was fascinated with that followed her throat down to her collarbones, her pulse throbbing under his finger.

“Joyce, if I do not get to do that to you daily, I may hand my balls to the Women’s Council and tell them to turn them into a purse.”

Joyce snorted, clenching around him in her laughter in a way that made Sung groan again. Joyce looked at him in wonder. “Did you feel that?”

“Yes, my love,” he gasped. “I felt that. A lot.”

Laurie Bowler

“Our bodies are amazing, aren’t they?” she said, stroking his chest, her cheeks pink again in the low light.

He kissed her softly and said against her lips. “Yours is, anyway.”

Anima

JOYCE

They talked, laughed and kissed, and Joyce hoped he would soon be ready to love her again. But at some point, she dozed off.

When she woke, the room was midnight dark. She lay on her side, her back curled into Sung's chest, his lips in her hair, his arm over her waist, their fingers linked together. He had wrapped himself around her, his body, his warmth hugging her from her shoulders to her knees. He sighed, guessing that she was awake. Joyce made to roll over to face him. But he stopped her, kissing her shoulder once, then twice.

"Are you well, wife?"

"I am very, very well," she said, leaning back into him and stretching. Sore muscles ached, but she had gained so deliciously that she did not care.

When she relaxed, her arm was back to trail her fingers in his hair, and his lips were at her neck. His hand found her breast, and his breathing quickened. Joyce hummed happily and arched, nudging him with her backside where she could feel him coming alive.

He hissed. "She-wolf," he growled, and she laughed but did it again.

He took her hip in his hand to stop her moving, but as he kissed her neck and whispered what he wanted to do, that fire that had banked low in her belly crackled to life again.

Laurie Bowler

SUNG

He had laid in bed, holding her, for almost an hour. She had cracked him open like an egg, and even though he wanted it- wanted her- the sheer power of the feelings was overwhelming. He was shocked by the waves of emotion rolling through him: love, possessiveness, protectiveness, fear, delight... Emotions whipped around each other, a storm of chaos in his heart that he had never experienced.

She was suddenly everything. He had never imagined a moment when the balance of his decisions would weigh anywhere else except for his people and kingdom. But staring at her as she slept, Sung knew... he knew...

He would let all of them die to save her. And the creator forgive him; he knew how wrong that was.

Once she had drifted off to sleep, he had been unable to resist curling his body around her, like a mother with a cub, shielding and warming her with his body. He held her, and as she slept, he prayed.

Keep her safe.

Let the people see her.

Keep the wolves at bay...

His mind kept returning to the declarations she had made and the people she had chosen, the ways it would shock or displease the elders... and he kept shaking the thoughts off and pushing them away.

She was human, not Anima. Of course, she had done things differently. He prayed more.

Show me how to teach her.

Show me how to teach them to value what she brings...

Then, his mind drifted away from power and the throne, even from his people. That image flashed in his mind again, that vision he'd had of her, heavy with child, leading another by the hand, her cheeks full, smile flashing... An ache started in his chest and rolled out of his throat in a sound he had never made before, a call he did not understand. But it spoke to his heart as he clung to her, pleading for her.

Anima

Then she sighed and stretched, utterly unaware of his remarkable experience. She rubbed her bottom against him, where he was already ready for her. She had one hand back, her fingers in his hair, as he stroked her hair back so he could nuzzle and kiss her neck. Then, when she bumped him, he cursed quietly and held her at the hip so she could not move. If she did not stop, she would push him over the edge. Losing control was the last thing he wanted right now when everything was becoming so clear.

“Are you hurting?” he whispered.

“Not too much,” she rasped, her voice rough from the sleep. “Not enough to stop.”

He could hear the smile in her voice.

“Mmmmm... do you want to try something?” he purred.

“I told you, Sung, the answer is always yes.”

A growl of pleasure pattered in his throat as he curled the arm under her head until his fingers found her breast, then slid the other down and back to find her ready for him. She stiffened at first, but with his lips still on her neck, he slid one finger, then two, inside her, pressing and curling until her mouth dropped open and she arched into his touch.

“There are so many ways to love, Joyce,” he breathed in her ear as he touched and stroked, and she began to loosen under his hands. “We have a lifetime to find them all. But... there is one practice... unique to pride. We call it the claiming.”

“What...” she swallowed. “What is it?”

“Surrender,” he breathed, flicking at her nipple just as he pressed in with his other hand. Her breath caught, and her fingers tightened in his hair. “I would make my plea to you, show you my wish, and you choose, Joyce. The choice is always yours. But if you say yes, it will leave you marked forever. Any male that sees the mark... he will know, and the Leonine, they -”

“I want it, Sung,” she breathed. “I want to belong to you. I want people to know it.”

That strange noise rolled out of his throat again. He vibrated with need, shook with the urge to plunge into her then and there, but she had to make a choice. The claiming could not be forced.

But she was arching back, had brought both arms up, reaching back for him. He only touched and stroked for a moment for her pleasure, and then he forced himself to pull his hand

Laurie Bowler

back to her hip to stop kneading her breast. Her breath was short and fast. She made a little noise of frustration and turned her head.

“What -”

“It has to be your choice, Joyce,” he rasped. “I do not want to seduce you into it.”

She rolled over in his arms; her eyes were wide and earnest. “Tell me, and I will be honest with you.”

Sung swallowed hard. “I would never hurt you, Joyce. Never want to hurt you. But you would bleed, and you would be scared. Claiming is an ancient tradition rooted in our animal blood. And you would have to give yourself up,” he held her gaze, and she did not flinch. “You would be at my mercy completely. If I give over to it... I would take you. That is why you have to choose. You are my mate, my wife; I love you. I will not take you against your will.”

“Will it hurt?”

“Mostly, no. Mostly, it is an intense pleasure,” he said, breathing and tracing a hand down her spine. “It is my role to ensure that... that when you surrender, it is to your benefit. But at the end, when I mark you... there would be a pain,” he frowned, thinking of it.

She stared into his eyes, and then she said, without blinking. “I have trusted you since I was six years old, Sung. I know you would never enjoy hurting me,” Sung closed his eyes and pulled her into his chest. “Tell me what to do,” she whispered, and he huffed, unable to resist kissing her, deep and slow.

“Nothing,” he breathed against her lips, then retook them. “You do nothing but surrender.”

“Too late,” she whispered back and kissed him.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The Claiming

JOYCE

It started like their previous love-making, and Joyce was unaware of anything different for a few minutes. She got lost in kissing him, pressing into his touch, and feeling him quiver under her hand. But she could feel the tension in him, the vibration in his chest and muscles, hear the call humming in his blood, and she wondered what this would be, whether she would like it, and why she felt... excited.

Then he rolled her onto her back and leaned over her. Joyce blinked her eyes open for a moment, and she gasped. His eyes... his eyes were glowing again, but this time with a warm light. He focused on her with an intensity that stole her breath. As he stroked down her side, watching his hand on her skin, his touch was electric, as if whatever power within him brought that light from his eyes was also in his skin, fingertips, and lips.

"I love you, Joyce," his voice was like gravel tumbling over rocks. His fingertips on her face and neck made her shiver.

"I love you, too," she whispered back.

"Give over to me, love," he said in that low voice.

"Take what you want, Sung."

"Creator's light, I do not deserve you, woman," he groaned.

Joyce was about to argue, but with a low growl, he reared over her, positioning himself between her knees and dropping his face to her stomach. Shocked but delighted, she clung to him as he kissed and sucked his way up. His hair sliding along her skin was an erotic tingle that pushed her head back and made her pant. Latching onto the peak of one breast, his hands stroked and slid all over her until she undulated beneath him like her skin was water. He raised his head, his glowing eyes following his path as he drew his fingers down her arm to her hand and lifted it. The other pulled both her wrists into one of his hands to pin them on top of the furs over her head. His arm made a rippled steel bar between them that she wanted to lick.

Laurie Bowler

Sung stared down at her then and growled his pleasure. She was arched back, her breasts forced towards him, and one knee bent up. Stroking her thighs and sliding his fingers into her again, another low growl rolled through the room, and his eyes glowed brighter. Joyce gasped as the electric slide of his touch made her stiffen in the best way. She let her head fall back, baring her throat and whispering his name, telling him how wonderful his touch felt. His mouth went slack as he stared at her and moaned so low it was almost below hearing, resonating in his chest.

“I will never hurt you, Joyce. You are safe with me,” he crooned.

“I know,” she whispered back.

She was shivering with anticipation and keeping her hands pinned; he lay over her, covering her, pressing her into the furs as he slowly rolled his hips into her, beginning that delicious slide between them.

Unable to move anything but her body, Joyce arched to meet him each time, her breath coming in gasps. His arms braced, his muscles stood proud, and his shoulders made a wall over her; he threw his head back and called her at the peak of each slide. That huff twitched in her stomach, reaching for and increasing the shivering jolt he wrung out of her. Joyce could not hear herself over him but knew she was calling back, her voice breaking in her throat at each roll of his hips.

The shimmering promise of an orgasm grew deep within her, even though he had not entered her yet. But she did not want it to end this way again. She wanted him inside her. So, she started to brace and tried to escape the seductive call to tip over the edge. He dropped his chin and pressed harder into her until she cried joyfully.

“Give over, Joyce,” he moaned. “Surrender, let me take you... please...”

“Yes,” she gasped. “Yes.”

With a tormented groan, he breathed something she did not catch, then kissed her. Shifting his weight, he entered her with a thrust that almost overtook her. She cried his name, gasping and writhing. But she did not fight him, didn't resist, just let herself be invaded, be stroked, and kissed, and gave herself over to the pleasure of it. Somehow, he kept bringing her to that brink, then letting her slide away until she was desperate and pleading with him.

Then his breath began to hiss, and she felt his stomach clench against hers.

Anima

“Roll over,” he snarled, pulling out of her and letting go of her hands in one movement.

He reared back, kneeling between her knees and staring at her with hot, demanding eyes in the dark. The loss of sensation was confusing, and it took her a moment to realise what he wanted. But she rolled over, getting on all fours, her breath coming faster.

“Like this?”

He growled his approval and first took her chin and turned her head, leaning over her back to kiss her, his tongue sliding against her, rough and demanding. She sucked in a breath and arched her back so her shoulders brushed his chest and sighed. Shuddering, he pressed her down, a hand, gentle but firm, between her shoulder blades until she was on her elbows. Then he straightened behind her, took her hips, and rubbed against her first, his breath hissing between his teeth.

“Hold your breath, Joyce,” he gravelled. “Don’t breathe.”

She sucked in and held, and he stroked her twice more before taking himself in hand and guiding himself into her in a long, slow slide with her quivering mouth open in a silent scream. He called out, his voice changed, half-roar, half-moan, ending in a huff that tightened her stomach.

But he did not wait, did not slow, just grasped her hips, pulling almost the entire way out of her, then plunging back in.

Laurie Bowler

JOYCE

Joyce saw stars as he thrust again and again, a slow but punishing rhythm that did not stop even as he leaned over her, his chest brushing her back, one hand underneath them to knead her breast, and he whispered.

“Now, let go. Breathe, scream... do whatever you need to do... but do. Not fight.”

She sucked in an audible breath as he pulled out, then cried his name when he pushed back in hard. Again, again. He grunted, his thighs slapping against her with each powerful thrust, that rolling growl snapping in his throat. Caught between the wall of her pleasure and his power, Joyce quivered. Every muscle in her body was alight, but that wave at her core was building and building each time he reached inside her. The pleasure was so intense it was almost painful, and he still did not stop.

Groaning her name, he placed one hand between her shoulder blades, bracing to pound her against it until she cried uncontrollably with each thrust. Then he twisted the hand into her hair and slowly pulled her head back, curling over her to plunder her mouth in time with his thrusts, his breath tearing in and out of his nose. She realised he was trembling and pulled so tight he was about to snap.

“It is okay... Sung...” He stopped kissing her and straightened, the mating call erupting from his throat with every roll of his hips. His entire body trembled like he was the one who was fighting. “Sung!”

“Joyce... oh, Joyce...”

“Don’t stop! I want you.”

“I do not want to hurt you -”

“You won’t; I want this, all of you -oh!”

He roared, slipping whatever tether he had held. Joyce could do nothing but give herself over to the storm of him as he lifted, pulled her knees off the furs, held her hips and pounded into her, roaring and calling. His breath rips out of him, and a strange, deep resonance in his chest as if two voices tore out his throat together. Joyce’s skin washed in tingles as her climax approached, but this wave threatened to crest not at that bundle of nerves he played so expertly but deep inside her, a flip switched by the weight and pressure of him inside. Her body shook.

Anima

“Joyce... Joyce!” he groaned through his teeth.

“Sung!”

Then, tilting her hips again, he leaned forward, resting her belly on his broad thighs as he leaned over her again. The skin at her back prickled as it was teased by his chest. But she was so deep in pleasure that she could only cry out with his every movement. He twisted her hair around his fist and laid his mouth at her ear, his breath thundering on her skin.

“Hold on to me, love!” He put his free hand down next to hers, and she grasped it, the noises still tearing out of her with every roll of his hips. “You are mine,” he snarled.

She screamed, overwhelmed as a wave of pleasure crashed through her, almost taking her out of her skin. At that exact moment, Sung latched his mouth at the point where her shoulder met her neck, biting down as he roared his climax. His teeth pierced her skin, and when she sucked in, stiffening against the pain, he growled again, holding her there, pressing hers into the furs, his teeth in her skin. As he shook and groaned, his breath heaving, Joyce slumped into the furs, exhausted, sated, and lightheaded with sheer pleasure. As if it had stolen her oxygen.

His weight on her back was delicious; she wished they could lay that way forever.

Sung still panted, gasping, growls and groans breaking out of his throat as he shuddered back to sanity. He slumped but took some of his weight on his elbows, dropping her hair to curl his arm around her head. Like he was holding her safe. His breath fluttered against her cheek when he finally released her with his teeth, kissing and licking to soothe the half-moon wounds in her skin.

“You are bleeding,” he said in a voice so rough and deep that it came from the rock beneath them. “I am so sorry,” he moved to roll off her, but she whimpered and put her hand on his head.

“Don’t, not yet,” she whispered. “Stay close.”

“Joyce-”

“Sung, I... I have never felt this way before,” she whimpered, her voice cracking. “I...” she was embarrassed to be fighting tears, and he shushed her, kissing her neck and ear.

“I know,” he murmured. “Me too,” he rolled off of her, and she complained, but he only rolled to his side, then gathered her in, curling her into a ball and wrapping himself around her.

Laurie Bowler

She sniffed, and he shushed her, stroking his hands down her neck and kissing her wound, cheek, and hair. "You are mine now," he whispered.

"I thought I already was," she said in a quivering voice.

"Even more, now," he said, his voice thick with satisfaction. "This has nothing to do with the kingdom or mating. This is the claim. Male to female, regardless of position in the pride. It is my vow to you that wherever you are, no matter what you face, I will go with you. My body for yours, my blood for yours, my life for yours. You are mine, and I will die to protect you."

She sniffed again and lifted her head to meet his eyes that still glowed but with a soft light now. She touched his face.

"I don't have words, Sung."

"Neither do I," he said softly. "That is why I bit you."

And the words were so foreign, so she burst into laughter out of the realm of anything Joyce had ever thought she would hear from a man, let alone anything to make her heart swell.

Sung smiled. "I am glad you find it funny," he growled, pulling her tighter and kissing her.

When he finally pulled away, Joyce sighed so happily that she almost wept again.

Anima

SUNG

They did not have time to do anything except get ready for breakfast. He woke earlier than Joyce and forced himself to leave her sleeping, grumbling when she only woke as the lanterns lit. He was anxious, he realised, as he kissed her shoulder and whispered good morning. His stomach churning with nervous anticipation as they got out of bed and readied to face the day.

He wanted to warn her what might be coming and how the people might react to her chosen companions and the claiming. But she was so happy. She kissed him and told him how handsome he was before she jumped out of bed, hugged him when he got up and danced to the closet to find her clothes. She sang in the bathing room and skipped into the kitchen for a drink of water before returning to get dressed.

“You are happy this morning,” he said, biting back his tension because he did not want to ruin her mood.

“I feel like I finally know what I am here to do,” she said, pulling a simple cotton tunic over her head to pair with the leather leggings the women had found for her a few days earlier. Sung’s brows pinched, and he stared into the closet, wondering how to tell her, but she did not let him brood. “Stop growling,” she hushed him. Sung blinked. Had he growled? “The women’s council warned me,” she continued with one hand on his shoulder. “I know the people will take some time to get used to me and that I am doing things differently. But even Khloe said I could win if I was willing to fight for it. And she must know, right?”

“She sure does,” Sung said, surprised.

He had assumed the women had not known Joyce was picking Gray, a male, as one of her companions. The poor kid was going to have one hell of a day today. The youngest was appointed Ruling Advisor for ten generations, and his female Patron had just been claimed. If it had been someone else’s mate, someone else’s Kingdom, Sung would have laughed until his sides ached. He was glad the woman had spoken to her about it, though. At least they were on board. Joyce needed them behind her.

Laurie Bowler

“I am excited to start planning,” Joyce said, pulling a string of necklaces the women had given her the night before over her head and twisting her hair into a braid. “And I am looking forward to feeling like I have a reason to exist.”

Unable to resist the warm blush on her cheeks and sparkling eyes, Sung pulled her into his chest and kissed her soundly. “You are going to be great,” he said. “But you already have a reason to exist: You are for me, I told you.”

Her smile softened, and she pulled him back into another kiss, then groaned when he tried to deepen it and twisted out of his grip.

“Don’t distract me. I have to get to breakfast! I am supposed to meet them there.”

Sung sighed. That was right, all three of them, including the deformed male.

“Maybe... maybe you should have breakfast with me, then meet with them later. Somewhere more private?” he asked casually.

“Oh, so now you want to take my attention, now that you have got competition,” she grinned. Sung almost swallowed his tongue. She had no idea. But not noticing his apprehension, she hummed as she left the room, tossing some comment over her shoulder about sticking to her promises.

Sung took a moment to buckle his pants and pray hurriedly for her before reluctantly following her out. She noticed his slow pace and asked him about it.

“I just do not want to share you,” he said truthfully, conscious of not sharing his fear. But she did not seem to notice, grinning and teasing him when he suddenly remembered that he also needed... something from the bedroom.

By the time he returned with the different belt he did not need, she was waiting for him by the barred door. He grinned when he saw his vest and pants from the night before, one thrown over the sideboard, the other kicked onto the floor.

Joyce followed his gaze and blushed, but her eyes heated when they met his.

“I will need you to unbar the door,” she said. “I can’t lift it.”

Trying not to strut, Sung hefted the wooden beam easily and set it down next to the door, but as Joyce thanked him and moved to open it, he leaned against it and looked at her pointedly.

“What?” she asked.

Anima

“What is that strange tradition they have in your world where you pay people extra for doing something that is their job?”

“Tipping?” she asked.

“Yes, tipping. I need a tip for opening the door for you and not keeping you locked here for my pleasure.”

She tilted her head, and her eyes went her again. She walked up to him slowly, putting a hand to his chest, then looked at him through her lashes, a wicked smile on her face.

“Sung?” she whispered, beckoning him down to their level.

He leaned down, eyes still on hers. “Yes?”

She put her arms around his neck and leaned her lips into his ear. “Move out of the way; otherwise, I will tell Erwin and the guards you told me you are handing your balls to the women’s council.”

He pretended offence and stood straight, folding his arms, barring her from the door. Then he raised one eyebrow in a challenge.

“I would like to see you try,” he said, his voice rolling into a low, good-natured growl.

She tilted her head again, and Sung nearly groaned at the wicked smile on her face as she leaned into him and slid her hand down his stomach, then lower and lower. He leapt to grab her wrists, leaning forward until they were nose to nose. Then she kissed him... and kissed him.

Sung’s breath sped up, and he let go of her hands to cup her face as she opened her mouth, and their tongues tangled.

But as soon as he lost her, she twisted around him to the door, singing “Thank you, husband!” and waving her shoulder at him as she darted outside.

Sung growled for real then but swung the big door open so he could fit through and followed her into whatever they would face that day.

Whatever it was, he knew she would be worth it.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The Mark

SUNG

He caught her around the middle right before she reached the opening of the cave and the sunshine beyond. She shrieked when he growled and pulled her into his chest, kissing and stopping her again.

“Are you sure you do not want to stay here and have dessert instead of breakfast?” he murmured, sliding a hand down her ass and pulling her against him. Then he kissed her, and the way she leaned into him for a minute, he thought maybe she had changed her mind.

But in the end, she pulled back and sighed but shook her head. “I am excited to get started,” she said softly, stroking his hair. “And I am excited to come home with you tonight,” she added, wriggling her eyebrows.

Sung huffed but let her go. “Meet me for lunch then?” he said quietly, praying breakfast would be uneventful.

“Of course! Oh, and do you think now that the people have accepted me, we can lose the guards here?” she said, tipping her head towards the nearest man standing halfway across the clearing.

Sung’s heart sank. She said she knew if she fought with her hands, but... she did not understand what she would face. He would speak to her at lunch. “I, uh... I do not know, Joyce....”

“Wouldn’t it be nice to be outside at night... with some privacy?” she added, dropping her voice and giving him a heated look.

Sung swallowed and willed his body not to tighten at the thought. “I will talk to Erwin about the guards; maybe, regardless, let’s add it to the list,” he winked at her.

She laughed and leaned up to kiss him one more time. “I am going now. Are you coming?” she said.

“I will talk to the guards first to see if there have been any issues in the last few days. You go have fun; I will see you at lunch.”

Anima

“Okay, I will,” and she trotted off towards the trail, which just happened to take her past the nearest guard.

Sung’s teeth set as the man turned to look at her, waving a greeting as she passed. Sung wondered if he had noticed, but his question was answered when the man’s mouth dropped open, and then he looked back at Sung. Hot rage shot through Sung’s chest in a bolt so pure he almost shifted. The guard immediately dropped to one knee, his eyes to the ground, his weapon held out, away from his body and Sung.

“I am sorry, sir. I did not realise -”

“What is wrong?” Joyce said, her voice shaky. She had stopped on the trail just past the man and was standing there, looking between him and Sung.

Teeth gritted, Sung shook his head to clear it.

The man was no threat. He had smiled at her to greet her. That was all, he reminded himself as his breath began to heave and not with desire. The next nearest guard had turned when this one called out to Sung, but the man put a hand out towards him.

“She is claimed,” he called hurriedly.

The other guard’s eyes went wide, dropping to one knee. Sung swore as Joyce frowned, watching each of these guards kneeling in a semi-circle around the clearing before Sung.

“Sung, what is going on?” she asked, her voice troubled.

Sung groaned in his throat.

JOYCE

It was like when Erwin interrupted that night; they had almost... but nothing was happening now. She was just walking ahead of him. He had seemed fine. So, why did the men all act like the wrong look would send him into a rage?

Then, the nearest one called to the others about her being claimed.

“Sung?” she asked. “What is going on?”

She put a hand on her shoulder and the marks on her skin. He had said they would notice. That they had known what had happened. Beyond the soreness when she woke, she had not

Laurie Bowler

thought about it. He had said it had nothing to do with the kingdom or being her queen. It was only for them.

So, why did the men seem shocked?

“Sung?” she called again.

“It is nothing, Joyce; go to breakfast. I will... speak with the men.”

She frowned at him, but he gave her a look that was as tired as it was troubled, and she could see that he did not want to speak to her about it just then. So, she sighed and waved, then turned to walk away again. As she disappeared under the trees, she passed Erwin on his way toward the cave. He smiled and greeted her, then his eyes widened, but he covered them quickly.

Joyce gave him a wry smile; this claiming thing was more significant than she had realised and kept walking. But she made a mental note to pin Sung down that afternoon.

Anima

SUNG

He kept his stance as relaxed as he could until she was gone under the trees, then he turned towards the guard, who still knelt, one fist to his chest, the other pointing the spear as far from Sung as he could.

“At ease, slowly,” Sung growled. The man came to his feet but kept his eyes down. “You can relax, man. I am not going to unleash on you.”

The guard raised his eyes slowly, checking as they met Sung’s. Sung did feel the surge of dominance rise in him when the man looked at him, but he swallowed it back. He was going to get used to this. They had mated, and he claimed her so close together. He had not recovered from one entirely before he had to deal with the other. He forced himself to meet the man’s gaze and clenched his hands at his sides.

“You tell no one of this,” he snarled.

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“I do not want the males avoiding me; where is Erwin this morning?”

“He is, uh, on his way, Sire. I think.”

Sung swore under his breath. “I am going back into the cave. As soon as he gets here, you tell him to come to find -” Then Sung heard his name on the morning breeze.

He turned to find his best friend stalking towards him, his face a thundercloud.

Sung sighed. “Good morning, Behr,” Sung called as his friend started across the clearing.

Erwin shot him a look, stopped to speak with the guard, and then strode towards the cave mouth, Sung observing him as he passed him.

“You claimed her, ALREADY?” Erwin growled as their long legs ate up the ground between the entrance to the cave. “Are all the Leonine born with an impatient stick shoved up their asses, or is it just you?”

“It is a natural step forward -” Sung began.

“You are joking right now, right?” Erwin snarled. “You know, mated couples that did not claim for YEARS, Sung. Years! And some never have. Did you think this is what the people needed? The wolves? With everything else going on, you thought turning yourself into a possessive asshole was the right step forward?”

Laurie Bowler

"I can control it."

"Oh really?" Erwin snorted. "How much do you want to tear my throat right now?"

"I don't!"

They reached the opening, and Erwin walked ahead, pulling the door open for Sung and mockingly bowing in front of it as Sung walked through. Erwin leaned his spear to face Sung when they entered the great room. "I just passed your wife on the trail, and our arms brushed. You can smell her on me if you want; how about now?"

That hot rage shuddered through Sung again, but he clenched his jaw and forced himself to shrug. "I will be fine," he said through his teeth.

"You are a forest fire waiting for a spark. What were you thinking?"

Sung stepped into his friend's space and glared up into his eyes, his voice low. "I was thinking that I am your king, and she is your queen, and I will not answer you about what happens with my mate in the dark of the night."

"No, you do not answer me about that, Sung," Erwin's jaw twitched. "But you will force me to put men in front of you when you are on a hair-trigger, and you will force your people to deal with yet more change, more uncertainty just so... what? So, you can find more pleasure with a human?"

"It had nothing to do with pleasure--"

Erwin rolled his eyes and snorted. Sung's hand shot out to take his friend by the shirt and pull him in close, snarling in his face, teeth bared as he growled. "What she is is so far beyond my pleasure that if you disrespect her in that way again, I swear by the creator's mane, I will put you down, Erwin. Do not test me."

Erwin sagged immediately, letting his knees hit the stone floor when Sung let him go, hands up in surrender, eyes to the floor.

"I am sorry, Sung, I am sorry. I would never... it was not intended to disrespect your mate," Sung stood over his bowed neck, the growl rolling in his throat, letting this dominance be seen and heard. Erwin opened his hands towards him. "Breathe, brother... I am sorry."

Sung turned on his heel and began pacing the floor. Erwin did not move but glanced up at him. Sung ignored the shadow of anger that remained in his friend's eyes. Erwin had

Anima

overstepped, speaking about Joyce that way, but Sung knew his judgment of the consequences was true. Sung could not fault him for that. He cursed as he paced, his friend watching him warily.

"I am sorry, too, Behr," he mumbled finally. "It was not... I did not plan to do this. But last night...." he clawed both hands through his hair and paced in the other direction. "It was as if... as if she had taken possession of my guts! She was sleeping, not even talking to me, for the creator's sake. But everything in me... I had to make her mine."

"She was already yours," Erwin said, his voice tired.

"You do not understand. It was overwhelming; the feelings inside me... I do not have words. Except to say that nothing else mattered. If she had said no, I would have accepted it."

"I should hope so!"

Sung shot him a look but saw that Erwin was grinning and softened. "But she did not say no," he stopped pacing then and turned to face his friend.

"I should hope so!"

"She did not say no, Erwin. She... gave herself over to me, and it was like... it was like something inside me was satisfied. Something that has never been satisfied before."

Erwin took a deep breath, his lips thin. "I know what you mean," he finally said flatly.

Sung frowned. "The equine claims their mates?"

"No, but... there was a night I wish we did," he said. "I know the feelings you describe. I am envious that you had something you could do about it".

Sung grinned. "You talk a big game, my friend, but your heart is even more submissive to your mate than mine."

"Holly is the creator's gift to me," Erwin said with a shrug. "And when she wraps her legs around me...." He visibly shuddered his eyes going distant momentarily, his jaw slack.

Sung growled, "I do not need to hear about that," Erwin blinked and focused on Sung again, who sighed. "I just want you to understand. I was not aiming for this. I did not plan it. I just... could not help it."

Erwin looked unimpressed but got to his feet, observing Sung. Sung turned his back and breathed so he would not resist the urge to make him submit again. This was going to be inconvenient, especially if anyone touched her and she returned to the cave with anyone else's

Laurie Bowler

scent on her; Sung groaned. There was no way around it; he would have to keep himself on the tightest leash. He could not afford another scandal by attacking one of his people out of sheer dominance.

“What is she doing today?” Erwin asked, yanking Sung out of his self-pity.

“Other than being very excited to meet with her cohorts and begin finding work that will probably confuse the people and threaten her place in the pride?” Sung murmured.

“Poor Gray,” Erwin said, keeping his voice carefully neutral. Sung huffed. “So, I take it you did not know that beforehand?”

“No, are you joking? I would have told her in no uncertain terms to pick a female! Why did you not talk to her?”

“She told me the women’s council gave her advice. The way she spoke about it, I assumed she had told Khloe who they were and gotten approval. I am guessing no one even considered that she would pick a male.”

“How will this work if she is in foal? Or unwell? Will you let him into the bed chamber when she is -?”

“Perhaps we can discuss those slim possibilities another time?” Sung snarled through his teeth. “Right now, I need to face today.”

“And poor Gray has to face you,” Erwin chuckled.

“You think this is a joke?”

“No, I think you dug your bed, and now you must lay in it.” They both sat, silently thinking through how having a male cohort to the queen could be disastrous. Then Erwin shook himself. “What’s done is done; we cannot change it. So, we move ahead today. Today is the day to focus on. So, tell me, Sung, how bad is it?”

“I almost tore out the guard’s throat,” Sung said sadly. “And I can stifle it against you, but... I wanted to bite your face when you said that about touching her. If someone takes me by surprise....”

“It might be a useful excuse for getting rid of some of the wolves,” Erwin said with a wicked smile. “I am sure I could trick at least a couple of them into touching her.”

“Until I catch one that is innocent, or someone else gets hurt in the scuffle.”

Anima

Both men grimaced.

“Perhaps it would be better if we met with the men here,” Erwin said. “Just for today. Just until we are all a little more settled. It will delay us while I call the men together, but I am sure they will understand. When is she expected back?”

“Not until after lunch; I am meeting her for lunch,” Sung swallowed hard. “It might be good to have you and a couple of others, just in case.”

Erwin sighed. “When you asked me to be your second, I said I knew your rule would be interesting.”

“Is that the word we are using now?” Sung asked dryly.

Erwin snorted. “You know, one day, we will look back on all of this and laugh.”

“I hope so,” Sung sighed. “I hope so.”

Laurie Bowler

Chapter Thirty-Five

A Whole New World

JOYCE

They sat at the table, all eating silently. Joyce was not sure whether to laugh or cry.

From the moment she arrived at the market, excited, happy, and anticipating finally finding her feet, it had been obvious there was a problem. Talia and Khloe stood at the foot of the stage, talking in low voices; Gray stood a few feet away, alone and watching them. And everyone else stared.

Then they smelled her and saw the mark on her shoulder.

Khloe was surprised but happy. "That will make the mating much more successful," she said confidently.

Joyce had blushed. "Success has not been an issue," she said through her teeth. But when she had turned towards Gray, his face was wide with horrified shock. "What?" she asked quickly, looking behind her, but there was only interested Anima looking at them from the nearby tables and Talia and Khloe watching closely. "What is wrong?"

"You are... he... you are claimed!" Gray said in a strangled voice, then looked over his shoulder and left and right as if he was afraid.

"What is wrong? What are you looking for?" She asked him quietly.

"Where is Sung?" He hissed back, still scanning over her shoulder and his own.

"He is back at the cave talking to Erwin last I saw... why?"

Gray raked a hand through his hair. "Does he... know you are meeting with me?"

"Yes, of course. Why?"

"I just imagine he is not happy about it."

"He was fine with it!" she had insisted, but a little dropped when she started to think about the morning so far. Had Sung been fine? About the cohorts? The breakfast? Not entirely. She frowned.

Gray gave a knowing look. "Did he talk to you ... about picking a male for your cohorts?"

"No, why?" Gray's lips twisted. "What is it? she asked, confused.

Anima

“Many would not be comfortable with me being near you in the ways an advisor needs to be at... at certain times when you are female and mated to the king, and you are now claimed!” he groaned.

And just like that, the crowd's response last night, Sung's apparent nerves this morning, and now the way they were all standing here looking like a bomb was about to drop made sense.

She had done the wrong thing again. “Why doesn't anyone tell me these things?” Joyce hissed her hands in fists. “How am I supposed to do anything here if you all have these stinking rules and you don't tell me about them!”

“It is like asking a lion to warn you about his claws,” Khloe quietly said beside her. “He would never think to; they are simply there. It would shock him to find out you were unaware”.

Joyce whirled. “You are fucking kidding me, right?”

Khloe blinked, and Talia stepped in, whispering. “Perhaps this conversation would be better had in private?”

“No! I will not be. I will not allow you to be chased from our breakfast. We will sit here, eat, and they will see you, all of you!” she insisted when Gray raised a finger and opened his mouth. “You are my advisor, Gray. Come sit next to me at the table, and Khloe, you sit on his other side, so the others see that too,” she growled.

She did not give them a chance to argue; she just stalked up the stairs and to her seat, pulling out the chair and dropping into it, scowling. She knew she was pouting, being a child. But... she wanted to drop her head in her hands and cry. Or stand up and scream.

Why did they keep letting her walk into these blunders?

When will this suspicion and isolation stop? Would it? Or would she forever be the weak human queen, always under Sung's wing?

The idea made her sick to her stomach so that she could barely eat. So, as the three of them sat there, picking at their food and barely even looking at each other, she felt sicker and sicker until she finally turned to Talia. “Where would we go for a private conversation?” she asked.

Talia thought for a moment. “We can go to my home if you like. It is not large, but it is closer than Khloe's, and there are enough chairs, I think.”

Laurie Bowler

“Thank you. I would like to see your home,” Joyce said, trying not to sound ungrateful. She turned to Gray and Khloe. “Take whatever food you want; we are going to Talia’s house.” Gray looked relieved, and Khloe nodded approval. Then she leaned into Gray, who looked alarmed and scanned the market again. “And if anyone says a word to you, you tell me!” she snapped.

He nodded, but his eyes just looked even more hunted. Joyce groaned with frustration and got out of her seat.

Talia’s house was a tree. One of the enormous trees that’s a couple of minutes walk from the market. Joyce was confused when she stopped along the path next to it and looked around. Perhaps there was a small path to her home or something? But Talia just walked around the trunk of the massive tree to their right. An arched door on the back side of it reminded Joyce of the door into the cave. Except this one was made from the bark of a much rougher and much darker brown than that on the tree. But just like in the cave, it looked like it had grown there.

“I am... honoured, Joyce,” Talia said with a slight bow, “that you are entering my home.”

“Don’t be silly,” Joyce laughed. “I am just -”

“Do you wish us to speak up when you offend, Joyce?” Khloe piped up quietly from behind her. She turned. “Yes, of course.”

“Then know that denying is disrespectful when an Anima tells you they are honoured. It denies both your value and what they believe you bring to them. Do you wish to do this to your friend?”

“No!” Joyce whirled. “Talia, I am sorry. I just meant... I do not think I am better than you or needing... me coming to your home is an honour for me!”

Talia’s face lit up. “Thank you!” she breathed.

Joyce froze with her mouth open momentarily; all her frustration and aggravation about understanding the people she was living with rushed in until she wanted to scream. Still, she swallowed it back, closed her mouth, and nodded her acceptance of the compliment, then glanced at Khloe, who nodded and winked like she knew what Joyce had done.

Joyce took a deep breath and followed Talia into the home. As soon as she stepped inside, her frustration was forgotten.

Anima

It was incredible.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Tribal Tension

SUNG

He was itching to shift and sink his beast teeth into something, but he just rolled his head and kept it under a tight lid because Erwin was already angry with him. He did not want to give his second reminder.

As Erwin sent runners out to find the elders and security chiefs of each tribe, they began to gather in the cave. Sung was relieved that none of them had been close to Joyce; her scent had not mingled anywhere. That might have been more than he could handle.

Then Gerard, who had not heard about the claim, slapped Sung on the back and said, "I saw the queen with her deformed advisor up the stage at breakfast. Bet you did not see that coming -"

A snarl tore out of Sung's throat as the image of Joyce there, next to the male, being touched and smelled, bloomed in his head, and he tensed, bracing, teeth bared, fighting the shift, fighting the urge to run out of the cave and find the little piece of –

"Sung?" Erwin said, low and calm.

Sung froze, trembling. Everyone was staring, but he could not give them his attention yet. He needed to get himself under control.

"What happened?" Gerard said, confused.

Erwin glared at Sung but turned to answer the question. "Your ever-wise king claimed his mate last night, and he is now struggling with her recent choices to put herself so close to another male".

Most of the men's jaws dropped, but Brant, who had seen the most in life, threw back his head and laughed.

At first, Sung wanted to snarl, but then the old man leaned forward on one knee and cackled at Sung. "You mated and claimed her in the same week she took a male cohort?" He spluttered into laughter again, and Sing had to admit that if someone else had done the same thing, he would have called the man a pure fool.

Anima

It was not planned, he rumbled.

But Brant just slapped his knee and laughed harder. "And here I thought mating would settle you down, Sung!" he brayed.

Sung gave a flat smile, still rolling his head against the shift, but it was coming under better control. The man's laughter was catching.

"I will admit I am looking forward to things... quieting down," he said quietly, and Brant almost fell out of his chair. The others chuckled, too, and it was the perfect response because Sung could take a couple of deep breaths and found his tension eased.

Soon, most of the council was there, and Sung was calm enough to begin their business.

"Before the wolves arrive," he said carefully as the men all turned to face him. "I want to warn you all that I intend to question Lucan today. Our queen is installed within the traditions; she had accepted the role and fulfilled the rite of mating, not to mention that she allowed me to claim her," his chest warmed. He paused, his mind flashing on her skin, the way she- no! He had to focus. Sung cleared his throat. "No more padding around the issue; she is here to stay. We as a people need to move together into the new age. This means we all must understand what the wolves are thinking and where they are heading, which could be an uncomfortable conversation. Will you stand behind me if I am forced to challenge him?"

The men all sighed or pressed their lips thin, but in the end, they each nodded or said yes without argument, and Sung breathed even easier. That had gone more smoothly than he had expected, for once.

They discussed minor business until the door opened. Lucan, the Alpha of the wolf packs and Lucine's father and his son, and second for the tribe, Lerrin, stepped in both handsome, prominent, muscular men with grey eyes. Lerrin made a near copy of his father, though Lucan had the grey in his hair at the temples.

They greeted the others, took their seats, and then everyone turned to Sung.

"Good morning," he said to the wolves, who nodded back, but Lerrin had the light of aggression in his eyes, not in his body language. "We are starting late because I asked you to come here. So, I won't drag this out. Lucan, we must have a serious conversation about the wolves and the threat to the queen."

Laurie Bowler

Lucan frowned, his arms folded over his broad chest as he leaned back in the chair. "We have made no threat to the queen," he grunted.

Sung met his gaze evenly. "There was an outright attack."

"And we told you, young wolves were getting excited about their strength. I believe it has also happened once or twice in the pride," Lerrin snapped.

Lucan cut a look at his son but did not contradict him.

Sung shook his head. "None of our young have ever threatened the life of a ruler."

"Which is why its wolves were sent to the camps, not Leonine," Lucan said quietly.

"Those wolves were all barely still in their adolescence. We would not have thought twice about it had they chosen a mate. I struggle with the way you are categorising them. They threatened the queen and launched an attack. Had I not been there -"

"But you were."

"But if I had not been -"

"We might have had a banishment instead. I know we already went through this with Erwin. Did he not brief you, or were you too busy... not mating?"

The hackles on Sung's neck rose, but he did not let it show on his face, though all the men would smell the warning in him.

"Do you have something you wish to say, Lucan?" he asked quietly.

"Do you have an accusation for me to answer, Sung?"

"Not an accusation, but a question, yes."

"Well then, sire, please, ask away," Lucan said, straightening in his chair and leaning forward to get closer to Sung.

Sung leaned forward, too. "Are the wolves still for Wildwood? Are they still for me?"

"Why would you even question?"

"Because no one else has tried to forcibly remove my queen from this world," Sung growled. The words punched through his ribs like an arrow, and he could not speak further for a moment, his mind full of images of his beloved, broken and bleeding.

"Little bit hypocritical, isn't it, Sung? When you were the one who brought her forcibly into it?"

Anima

“What are you talking about?” Sung snarled. “The wolves were the ones-”

Lucan leaned forward, almost coming out of his chair, his eyes alight with the strange predatory stare. “It seems to me that you are very, very good at taking things that don’t belong to you, Sung. So, why would you begrudge another doing it?”

The growl was so low that it started in Sung’s toes.

Laurie Bowler

Tree House

JOYCE

Joyce's jaw dropped as Talia stepped into the wide tree, walked to its middle, and then turned to face her, looking slightly anxious.

All Joyce could do was gape. The house was a tree. She stood inside a tree that was not perfectly round but more oval and had to be almost fifty feet long and close to forty wide. This ground floor was snug with rugs, a small fireplace with soft chairs set around, a kitchenette on one side, and a table with four chairs next to it. Next to the fireplace were wooden stairs that looked like they had been carved out of the tree and climbed to circle the outside. Joyce frowned up at them, startled to find they rose to a rectangle hole in what had to be the floor of the next level as if this entire home had been hollowed out of a living tree.

"Talia, this is amazing!" she said breathlessly.

Talia blinked. "It is just a home, though it is a great location. I was blessed that my parents built it when Wildwood was not as big. It is quite desirable now and makes selling my weaving much easier."

Joyce turned around, staring at everything decorated in lines and fabrics that somehow managed to be abstract yet giving the impression of leaves, branches, and trees. And like the doors, the whole structure of this room looked as if it had grown there and had been discovered rather than built.

"How did they do it?" She asked, awed.

Talia looked around, clearly confused by Joyce's reaction. "They just... built it?"

Joyce gave her a flat look.

"I have never seen this thing you can do, making things look like they are a part of the landscape rather than things!" Joyce noticed even the stones around the fireplace looked like they had been deposited there by a river rather than stacked and mortared in place. Joyce shook her head, but since the others were all staring like they were unsure what to say, she smiled and said, "Talia, I love your home."

Anima

“Thank you,” Talia said, her cheeks pinking. “And if you would like things like this, speak to Sung. Any master builders can achieve this for you.”

Joyce nodded. “I will. Thank you.”

Talia ushered them all over to the seats in the dining room, and as they settled in, Joyce’s chest began to burn with frustration again. Now that her distraction had passed, she found herself gritting her teeth.

Why didn’t anyone explain to her in detail that females did not appoint male cohorts? Why had they let her blunder into this? And what was she going to do about it?

Once they had all taken seats and Talia gave each of them a glass of juice that was sweet and crisp and reminded Joyce of orange juice, they all turned to her.

“I wish you had told me,” she said directly to Khloe. “When the women’s council explained that my chosen patronage might not be well received, I understood that, but had I known I was committing an even greater blunder...” she dropped her head into her hands. “I just want to get my feet under me! I want the people to -”

“Forgive me, Joyce, but your feet... are underneath the rest of you. Are you having some kind of problem with them?” Talia asked nervously, looking down at her legs.

Joyce groaned, “It is just a saying. It means I feel off-balance. Like... like something might push me over at any moment.”

Khloe touched her hand. “I am sorry, Joyce. It never occurred to me that you might... I just had not thought. Leonine is so possessive, and you and Sung seem so close; I never thought. I will try to anticipate these things to come. Still, sometimes I do not know the differences between humans and Anima, so it can be difficult to anticipate.”

Joyce nodded. That was fair. “Well, from this point forward, the thing we can all do is make a promise. You will tell me every time, right at the moment if I am doing something that offends people or seems strange. And I will promise to listen to you without getting angry. I may... I may still do what I am doing. I can’t know what my decisions will require. But I promise you I want to know if I am doing things differently, so at least if I am going to piss people off, I know I am doing it, okay?”

They all nodded. Talia bit back a smile.

Laurie Bowler

“Now... how do I fix this shitshow?” she cried, dropping her head into her hands. “What are you facing here? I have already named Gray, and I did it for a reason. He is good. He helps me understand other people. And he can scent things... but you are saying it will cause problems with Sung?”

Gray swallowed hard. “I am guessing he was a little focused on... claiming you?” he said, blushing.

If someone did not say something, their heads would explode from the rush of blood. Joyce was not sure she had ever seen a grown Anima blush. Of course, she blushed, too.

Khloe cleared her throat, and Joyce thanked the God Sung believed in that she started to speak. “The damage, so to speak, is done, Joyce. Now it is time, I think, to make the most of what you have. There will be... complications. And some concern among the people. But hopefully, everyone will eventually become used to it. It is not that it has never happened before. But generally, the primary advisor is not... different. Only because they are expected to follow you into every situation with discretion and... well....”

“If you are naked, and your husband is possessive, it’s kind of difficult for Gray,” Talia said bluntly.

Joyce choked on her juice. “Why would Gray need to be there when I am naked?”

Gray dropped his head into his hands.

“Perhaps you are in childbirth? Or ill? Or... there are any number of rituals and ceremonies _”

“WHAT?” Joyce gaped at Khloe. “You have naked ceremonies? What for?”

“Everything,” they all said at the same time.

Joyce dropped back in her chair and covered her face in her hands.

What had she gotten herself into?

Anima

Lies and Deceit

JOYCE

They were still sitting at Talia's table an hour later, and Joyce felt like they had gotten nowhere. "So, you are telling me people won't help my advisor directly because he is male?"

"And deformed," Khloe added carefully.

Joyce nodded. "Okay, then what about a survey?"

"A... what?" Khloe asked.

"A survey of the people."

"What is a survey?" Talia asked faintly.

Joyce shrugged. "It is asking many people the same questions to get a general feel for what the majority think or feel. Suppose you think people won't let Gray near to scent them and discuss things with them. In that case, you two could ask questions and have conversations. Still, he could be nearby, listening and scenting," the three of them looked at each other, and Joyce gritted her teeth. "Would it work?"

Khloe turned back to her first. "Your thoughts about Gray listening would work. But... Anima does not do surveys. As a rule, most people who do not have roles in ruling don't discuss these things. We simply... align where we believe we should go and allow others to do the same."

"Will they be offended by having questions asked of them? If they know, I asked you to?"

"Not offended," Talia offered. "But... they will find it strange. And you said you want to know that. Well, they may feel... even more separate from you if they feel like your processes are alien to ours...."

Joyce groaned and dropped her face into her hands. "Does anyone have any ideas about how I can get some information from the people and move forward without weirding them out?" No one answered her, and Joyce was feeling the lack of sleep from the night before. "Okay, this is not getting us anywhere. Can we meet again tomorrow? And in the meantime, please think about how I might learn the best way forward without just stumbling ahead."

"The best way forward with bringing the deformed and the ostracized... back into the tribes?"

Laurie Bowler

“Yes.”

Khloe’s shoulders rose and fell with her breath. “Okay, I will think about it.”

Talia and Gray shrugged and nodded, and Joyce could not discuss anything else. “I am going back to the cave,” she said sadly. “If you think of anything, feel free to come to find me there.”

She tried to make an effort to compliment the house again and be enthusiastic about starting their work slowly. Still, when she left, her shoulders were slumped. Then she got up.

Anima

SUNG

“You can say what you wish, Lucan, but my secrets are known in these circles. If you attempt to twist them, you will find little sympathy,” Sung said boldly and clearly, never taking his eyes off Lucan.

He knew the wolf did not want to admit Lucine had broken the rite because it would question all the wolves’ plans and decisions. After all, the pack had to have been involved. Then, their conspiracy in choosing Joyce would come to light, and Sung would have the people’s sympathy. It would crack Wildwood half like an egg but in Sung’s favour. The wolves were admired by the tribes but also feared.

He knew it, and Lucan knew it as they stared each other down.

Lucan snorted without humour, a sound that among the Anima meant a person’s scent was offensive. Sung bristled but did not move, though he marked Erwin getting quietly to his feet and shifting to be in reach of Lucan.

The wolf glared at him, elbows on his knees, those cold eyes staring.

“Well, Lucan?” He asked. “Make your claims, and when we are done shovelling your lies, you will still answer the questions because I would not be distracted from them today. The wolves have been actively undermining the Queen of Wildwood. You will soothe our fears today or leave here under guard, but you will answer my questions.”

Lucan rolled his eyes. “Always such a picture of integrity and nobility,” Lucan sneered. “If your people knew your truth -”

“They do, Lucan. Make an accusation, or answer a question, challenge me if that is what you wish to do, but enough of this fucking manipulation and bullshit. Are the wolves for Anima? Do you plot against your king and his queen? Or will you submit?”

“We have already submitted. You leave us no choice!” Lucan snarled.

“You have every choice in the world, Lucan, but you are stronger on my side than as my enemy. At least openly. Is that your ploy? Pretend to be loyal while you seed dissension?”

“I seed nothing but contempt for a king under the thrall of a weak human who is leading him by the cock -”

Laurie Bowler

Growls and snorts filled the room as Sung shoved to his feet, and everyone but the wolves stood with him.

There was a crystalline moment where Sung was poised for violence, and he had to force the beast back. If this was the moment, Lucan would be the one to select it. He would not pick a fight for dominance that was weak in itself.

“Do you challenge Lucan?” he said so quietly. “The elders will stand back and let me face you but also ensure you do not cheat. Everyone knows I won dominance without wolves, Joyce, or anyone else’s strength behind me. And if you cannot do the same, you will be banished. Make no mistake.”

His hands were clenched into fists against the shift, and he would not unleash it unless Lucan did so first, but he was calm. Perrin stared at his father, clearly torn. But Lucan did not stand.

“I make no challenge for the throne. I do not want to be king,” he spat.

Sung nodded. “Then hear this from one who does and is. I will find out if you are covering a plot against me, my queen, or any of my cohorts. You will be banished rather than killed if you tell me yourself. But if you tell me there is no plot, and I find out you lied...” he stepped forward, leaning into Lucan’s face, letting the light in his eyes flash. “I will kill you myself.”

Lucan just stared. “You threaten me, Sung?” Lucan finally said. No one else spoke.

“I speak true, Lucan. As ruler of the Anima and as your Alpha.”

Lerrin tensed next to his father, but Lucan did not flinch. “So quick to call yourself Alpha overall when you cannot even rule your wife's heart.”

Sung smiled smugly. “Somebody has not been paying attention this morning.”

For the first time, Lucan looked uncertain, but he recovered quickly. “Perhaps you know how it goes, Sung. You have been a touch distracted the past couple of weeks....”

“I would not have been distracted if the wolves were not making trouble.”

“My people do not make trouble; they fear! They are concerned for their futures and the futures of Wildwood!”

Anima

“Then you, as their Alpha, call off their ‘concern’ and control your people,” Sung growled, “or I will do it for you, and I assure you they will be far more fearful of that! It can be arranged if they need a demonstration of their king’s strength to bring them back into line!”

“Is that a threat, Sung? Against your people?”

“That is a promise. I will not risk Wildwood for the sake of Lupine pride.”

“Pride? Pride, Sung? Really? You accuse me of pride?”

“I accuse you of inciting your people to treason because you lost what little more than a chess game is.”

“You call the future of Anima a game of chess?”

“No, I call the wolves’ manipulations a game of chess. What if it had gone as you had planned, Lucan? What if Joyce had been killed and I had mated Lucine? Would we still be standing here?”

“Of course not!” There was a slight noise near the front door, but neither turned.

“Then do not tell me this has nothing to do with the wolves and their power.”

Lucan was on his feet. “This is not purely about power. It is about having a queen that cannot be bested by a ten-year-old. One who does not create a social shit show every time she opens her mouth, who could offer something to the strength of the people rather than applauding the weak!”

A small feminine gasp sounded, and Sung whipped his head around to find Joyce standing just inside the door. The men turned and got to their feet only to drop to their knees when they saw the claiming.

Joyce’s eyes were wide and disturbed as Lucan, two breaths after everyone else, cursed and dropped to a knee, saluting her. A murmur of acknowledgements of the queen rose in the room, but Joyce just stared at Sung, her eyes pained and embarrassed. And he could only stare back, his eyes pleading with her not to listen.

Then she swallowed, her eyes shining, and in a clear voice, told the men to stand up. “Thank you, all of you,” she said. “But I didn’t realise you would be here. I did not mean to disturb you. Please continue. I will... I will go to the other room.” And she disappeared.

Laurie Bowler

Sung gazed after her, his heart leaving the room in her wake, but with Lucan there and his accusation of distraction... he could not risk it. So, he was forced to turn back to face the man he was quickly beginning to see not as a combatant but as an outright enemy in his ranks. Then he caught the expression on Lucan's face, the sheer malice and contempt, and his beast roared and begged for release.

"Take your eyes off my wife!" The snarl began in his toes and rolled through his whole body as every man in the room slowly turned to put themselves to the floor before him.

Except for Lucan.

Even Lerrin knelt, but Lucan only bowed his head, hands fisted at his sides.

Sung's entire body trembled. When he spoke, it was with the growl in his throat and eyes he knew would shine in the dark. Erwin shifted nervously and tried to catch his gaze, but Sung stayed focused on Lucan.

"You have only one choice, Lucan, One. You put your people in their place. No more whispers behind hands, no more attacks, no more plots on me or my mate or the inhabitants of Wildwood."

"There are no plots," Lucan snarled.

Sung tensed, every hair on his body raised. "Either there are plots, Lucan, or you have lost control of your packs. So, what is it?"

"The only control that has been lost is yours, Sung."

Sung roared, and the men yanked Lucan back away from him as Erwin stepped between them, calling Sung down.

"Breath, brother, breathe. He is not attacking. He disagrees with you. No one here challenges you or your mate, Sung. Ease, brother, ease. Please!"

Sung stood, his breath heaving, his back rippling. Erwin knelt before him but spoke smoothly and confidently, hands raised to try to stop him, and he walked the line.

"Speaking of losing control," Lucan muttered.

Sung felt his body surge, but he fought back with a stifled roar and a pattering growl. He knew his eyes still glowed, but he did not move from his place in front of Erwin and did not shift.

Anima

“Get out of my house,” he said in a voice so dark even Brant blinked. “Get out of my city if you cannot live in peace.”

“I have touched no one! Nothing!”

“You have aided your people in violence, and you will admit it, or you will be watched, corralled like a common dog. Is that what you want, Lucan?”

“You cannot banish me for doing nothing!”

“Oh, I won’t,” Sung said and smiled like a predator on prey.

The two sheep in the room dropped to a knee at the sight of his smile, but he let it remain.

Lucan did not back down, but his eyes grew wary.

Then Lerrin stood. “I will take him out, and we will get it under control,” he said reluctantly, and Sung blinked.

“What was that?”

“I will take him, and we will talk to the people together. The wolf packs... do not challenge for control. Some factions were getting out of hand and... and we should have stopped them before now.”

“Hush, Lerrin!” his father hissed.

But Lerrin’s jaw was tight, and he faced Sung. “He did not make plans, but he enjoyed them. And I can... I can talk to people. We can settle things down.”

Sung turned his head slightly, measuring the man for deceit. But wolves were excellent liars. So, was it a trick? Or genuine?

Lucan growled like he was furious with his son, but that meant nothing if they had planned it. Sung turned to Erwin, who had gotten to his feet but was standing close.

“What say you?” he asked, tipping his head toward Lerrin.

“I say at some point, we have to give them a final warning and let them show us if they will stay in line.” A couple of the others murmured their agreement, so Sung nodded.

“Very well, Lerrin, this is your shot. The one and only you can thank your father for that. Pack discipline begins the next time I catch a wolf creating trouble for me or my wife. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sire.”

Laurie Bowler

“And if you can bring your people through this, it may be time for Lucan to have his challenger.”

Perrin did not answer that, though Lucan snarled. But the men began moving them, escorting them out and back to the wolf pack, while the eldest of the elders shuffled in their wake until only Erwin remained.

He waited until the last of them was out of the cave mouth and into the clearing, then folded his arms. “That could have -”

“Not now, Behr, please,” Sung said wearily. “I need to go comfort my wife.”

Anima

A New Plan

JOYCE

She had tried to go to the room and just sit. Accepted that the day had not been what she had hoped it would be, and that sucked, but it was not the end of the world. But the words of that man, a wolf, she was pretty sure, kept echoing in her head.

A queen that cannot be bested by a ten-year-old... who could offer something to the strength of the people...Joyce screwed her face up hard and breathed through her teeth. She would not cry because a bully had been throwing darts. She would not.

But Sung's face, the way he had winced... that, Joyce realised, was what hurt so badly.

Seeing that the accusations hit home for Sung had her undone. She knew the wolves were trouble and did not like her. Did that mean he agreed with them? Or only that he knew others did? Was she to blame for all the problems with the wolves, or would they have targeted anyone who was not a wolf?

She shook her head and pinned her lips together. Still, she could not stop the grief that washed over her when she thought about losing Sung or becoming a burden to him and him just putting up with it because he was so... nice. Was Sung going to regret mating her? That thought, the aching hollow it opened in her chest, broke her, and she sobbed.

She did not want him to be nice. She wanted him happy.

Somehow, she had figured out how to... how had the man put it? Offer something to the strength of the people. She had to, and she would. She would discard this hopeless cause of publicly championing the weak. If all it was going to do was cause more division, it would not achieve what she had hoped anyway. Besides, she had to be seen as strong herself before she could help others.

So, even though it was through tears, she gritted her teeth and vowed. She would remain queen. She would get stronger both physically and in the eyes of the people. And meanwhile, she would help the deformed and ostracised people privately. Once she was accepted, her power was strong, and Sung was not being undermined by her, she would find a way to champion them to the others. But that meant she had to find something to do and a way to bring strength to the people in the meantime.

Laurie Bowler

She took a deep breath and wiped her face, squeezing back the last tears and blinking to keep them away. She kept breathing deeply and muttering the plan to herself. She would talk to Sung when he was done, and they would figure out what she could do to make herself less weak. And then she would make these people see that weakness came in many forms. And they were not without their own!

She heard the door slide open and turned to find Sung standing there, his face sad and worried. She blinked; she knew she looked like she had been crying, but she raised her chin and met his eyes. "Something has to change, Sung," she said calmly. "I want to be with you and be happy here. So... something has to change."

"Joyce, I am so happy that you are here."

"It won't stay that way if that is how people see me."

Sung turned and closed the door behind him, then walked carefully to sit beside her on the sleeping platform.

She almost wept when he slid an arm around her waist and leaned in to kiss her hair, pulling her into his arms. She almost let herself fall into his strong chest and gave in to the tears. But that was the problem, wasn't it? She kept letting him be the strong one when really... she was the problem.

"No," she said sharply when he tried to pull her into his chest, and she straightened, bracing a hand on his broad thigh. "I can't keep letting you protect me. Because they do not respect that."

"Joyce, everyone who has criticised you has had to be supported and helped by their mates or their families at some point in their lives. They have just... conveniently forgotten that fact," he growled.

She shook her head. "Not like this. I get it; I do not, but I am starting to understand that I seek like a child to them. No adult wants to be forced to follow a child. So, I need to stop acting like a child with you."

"Trust me, you don't," he said, his eyes hot. He flashed her a wicked grin.

She snorted despite the tears and put a hand to his face. "You know that is not what I meant."

Anima

"I know, but... do not let Lucan make you doubt yourself, Joyce. The anima needs what you have and who you are. That is why I chose you. If I'd thought you were just weak and pathetic, I would have made the right choice for my people, no matter how it hurt me. But I knew, I know you are what we need here. You have different strengths. Strengths we need to develop in Anima."

"Then I need to find a way to make them see me."

"That is what I am trying to do!"

"No, me, Sung," she met his warm, brown eyes and smiled. "I need to be the one to make sure they can see and respect me and... want to listen. If we get to that place, I can do anything as queen because I will have won them over. Until we get there, it won't matter what I do. They won't see it as anything but a child playing."

He put his hand over hers. "I am sorry that you got dragged into this," he said in a low voice.

"I am not," she said, sniffing and leaning in. "But I am going to need you to keep giving me these pep talks when we are alone. Lots of support. Lots of one-on-one time, so I can draw from your strength when I am scared or lonely."

"Or horny," he whispered. "Also, then."

She laughed and kissed him. "Yes, that too."

Laurie Bowler

Something She Didn't Know

SUNG

She laughed at his joke, but neither of them stopped kissing. His breath was coming quickly when he had her pressed down on the furs and worked on her blouse's buttons. He opened her top button, then kissed the skin that was revealed. Opened the next and laid the flat of his tongue between her breasts with a deep groan. She had her hands in his hair, gripping him, and her chin back, her neck exposed and so tempting, but he was also about to reach her navel and dip his tongue in that sweet little dip-

"Stop, stop, Sung," she said suddenly, breathlessly.

He stopped immediately and raised his head. Had he hurt her? She still had her hands in his hair, but she had raised her head to meet his eyes and looked... frustrated? Did she want something else? "What's wrong?"

"I can't do this right now!" she whined and closed her eyes, letting her head drop back. "I have to go find the others and start figuring out what to do to connect to people."

"You can wait an hour," he said.

She raised an eyebrow. "A whole hour, huh?" she grinned.

Sung growled and buried his face in her stomach. She laughed and curled up like it tickled, struggling, pushing him away. He was forced to grip her wrists and pull her hands over her head, so he leaned over her, her blouse falling open until the insides of her breasts were borne, but the fabric denied him the full view. He growled again.

"Sung?" she said softly.

"Yes, my love?"

"I want this. I want you. but... if I do not get out there and start doing something, I will lose my nerve and... I do not want to keep going the way I am."

"As I said, you can wait an hour," he joked, nuzzling her neck.

But she did not laugh this time. "No, I can't. Sung, stop!" She struggled, and he immediately let go of her wrists, bracing himself on the furs on either side of her head.

Her hair splayed like a glow around her face, but her jaw was stiff, and her brows pinched.

"Love, I was playing. I would never hold you here against your will."

Anima

"I know. I know you mean well, but... seducing me is not making me stronger in anyone else's eyes."

He thought about that for a moment. "What about if you seduced me?"

"Sung!" she groaned. "Please. This is not helping."

"But -"

"Seriously, I need to get out of this cave, and I need to find my helpers, and I need to figure something out! Unless you want me weak? Is that it? Does it do something for you, Sung, that I am so breakable here? Do you feel like the hero? Is that why you chose me? Because it makes Sung feel good about Sung?"

"What? No!"

"Then what was it, Sung? What possessed you to bring me into this when you knew how different I was and how they would see that?"

A spark of anger burned in his chest. Did she think he had done this selfishly? Or intended to keep her weak?

He crawled off her, rolling to the side to sit on the platform's edge again. "I chose you, Joyce, because I had always wanted to choose you. So, yes, there was that bit of selfishness to it. But I meant what I said. If I had not been certain that you were what Anima needed, I would have given up my desires and picked a different mate for the people's good."

"If you always wanted me here, why did you not bring me here yourself? They told me the rite only happened because you refused to choose a mate. You could have married in any of those ten years, and no one would have been concerned. So, why didn't you?"

"Because I wanted you."

"Then why did you not come to get me?" Her gaze sparked, and Sung's anger and his doubt both surged. She did not have a clue. "Why not go get me yourself? Train me yourself? Prepare me for this? Why leave alone for thirteen years when I thought I would never see you again and -"

"I tried to," he murmured.

"If you always thought of me, why not... wait, what?" she froze, gaping at him.

Sung held her eyes for a moment, then started. "I tried. I did."

Laurie Bowler

"You tried what?"

"I tried to bring you here. I went to find you, to bring you here. Or at least to see if you still thought of me the way I thought of you."

"When?"

"Just before I turned eighteen."

She blinked, stunned.

"I know," he said, "it is so strange. I did not love you like this when I was ten. I did not think of you that way. But the longer I grew and strengthened, the more my thoughts would return to you ... tormented me."

"You came to find me?" She gasped. "In... on my world?"

He nodded.

"But I never saw you. I know I would not have recognised you before, but I would have remembered if I had seen you ... like this!"

"Yes, you are right. You did not see me, but I saw you."

"What!"

Sung turned to face her, and, for once, he could not read her expression. She was shocked, no doubt. But other things flitted across her face and scent, a mix of anger, fear, and confusion. He could not tell what she felt the most, perhaps because she could not.

"You are telling me... you are saying you came back to find me. About us, and you did not talk to me?" she said, her voice high and sharp.

He nodded. "You were... I thought you were already settling with someone else. And your parents, they were still there... you did not seem to need me. You were happy."

She stared, and Sung waited.

"Sung?"

"Yes, love?"

"What on God's green earth are you talking about?"

Anima

The Final Truth Part 1

JOYCE

He could not be saying what she thought he was saying. He could not be. Joyce's heart raced, and she stared at her husband, her mate, who watched her like he was unsure whether to answer.

"Sung," she snapped. "What the hell are you talking about? When did you see me? When was I happy?"

"Why are you angry, Joyce?"

"Why? Because you are telling me you saw me but did not talk to me. That you just... assumed things about my life without asking me. And that we could have... this might have... you are saying we had a chance before! And you just... gave up? Sung, tell me, please! When did this happen? Why did you not talk to me? How the hell did you decide that I was already with someone else? I was a virgin! Who did you think -"

He raised his hands, his face down. "Just... one at a time, please, Joyce. Let me... let me tell you the story, and if you are still angry at the end, well, I guess we will deal with it then," he said, pulling himself back up onto the sleeping platform to sit next to her, facing the door. "I was seventeen by your years, I think, when my father became ill and started talking to me about challenging for the throne."

"Challenging?"

"There are two ways to take the throne; if the ruler dies, the heir can step in and be challenged for it. But many heirs step in with great support from the people, so they are never challenged. However, anyone, including the heir, can challenge the ruler for dominance if the ruler is still alive. Win the throne. That was how my father wanted me to take it."

"What? Why?"

"Because the people had been through war and upheaval, and then we were in a time when people would not challenge me."

"And that is bad because?"

"Because later, if things got difficult again, if there was dissension or war, those who felt insecure would remember that I had taken the throne without ever having to fight and prove

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myself. They would not have evidence of my strength. They would not trust me or might challenge me, thinking I am weak. My father did not want me to be challenged later, at the worst possible time, when something else was already going wrong. As he had been. When he had been forced to send me to your world. So as soon as he knew he would not recover from his illness, he started talking to me about challenging him while he was still strong so that I would be seen as the king in truth and he could die in peace, knowing it," he swallowed, and Joyce took his hand. She was still tensed, still baffled to know that he had come for her, then left; why? But... she did not like seeing him in pain, and talking about his father dying hurt him. "At first, I refused to talk to him about it. Refused to believe he was dying. Then, even after I had accepted that I refused to fight him. He became... furious. He gave me good advice, and I refused to take it. It was a very tense time between us."

"What happened?"

"My mother started talking to me about ruling, about the responsibility of a king, and how his decisions must always, first and foremost, be for the good of his people. I thought it was a political discussion; they had peppered my life since I was small. But soon, it became clear she was... aiming for something. She started to talk about how the king carried the people with him in his skin. His bones and that to die as king without certainty around who would take your place... fearing that someone might succeed you who was not suitable for the people... that was torment. She told me my father was not just trying to set me up to rule. He was trying to protect his people from being ruled by someone else. But my mother... was aware of more than the need for a solid ruler. She knew when I ascended the throne, I would stand alone. And that worried her. I had mated with females but had not found a true mate, my heart's match. She worried that I had not even been deeply interested in any of them. She knew the life of a king was, by necessity, isolated. She said I needed a partner with whom I could completely be myself. Someone who would support me even when they were angry with me; she warned me that they would get angry. A lot, she emphasised that." He smiled sadly. "And she asked me whom I knew, which females I had known in my life that made me feel safe like that. Certain of myself, comfortable, and... I immediately thought of you, Joyce," he said. Then turned and met her eyes.

She swallowed the lump that rose in her throat.

Anima

He turned away. "It was strange. It was not that I had never thought of you before; I had always thought of you with nostalgia. That sense of a childhood loss. I had always wondered what happened to you and who you had become. But... you had become unreal in my mind. A vision. When my mother asked me, I answered honestly. And she was not surprised. She told me to go for you. To find the one that would make my heart safe, then to come back and challenge my father, so they could see me settled and happy and on the throne before... before he got weak." He swallowed again. "I thought she was crazy. But the idea would not leave me alone. For a week, I got up every morning, swearing I was not going to do it, and as the day went on and as my fear for my father grew, it became almost an obsession. A compulsion. I had to find you and see ... if you were indeed the right one."

He looked at her, and Joyce held her breath.

Laurie Bowler

The Final Truth – Part 2

JOYCE

“So, the night my father had a coughing fit that left him bloodied, I went. I packed a bag, and my mother gave me some quick advice, things to remember because it had been so many years since I was there. And I was going alone.”

Joyce waited, but he seemed reluctant to go further. “What is it?” she asked.

“I fear your anger,” he said simply. “I want you to remember I was young and naive, and I had many things on my mind then. I did not see everything through the same eyes I would now.”

She nodded. “I will, Sung. I promise.”

He took a deep breath. “I found you the second day. You were still in that town, which pleased me. You were not hard to find. You had moved houses, but not far. I think you were still in school, but the weather was warm, and I remembered that school stopped during those months. Anyway, when I found you... it was nighttime. You were in the backyard of your home, and you sat in the front of the fire pit, and you looked... beautiful,” he said, hushed with awe. “Until that moment, I had been looking for my childhood friend, wanting to discover who she had become and if she still made me feel so sure and comfortable. But when I saw you there... something opened up inside me, Joyce.”

“Carry on,” Joyce said gently.

“I had been hiding in the parklands that bordered your property, and when I saw you, I was so overcome I stood straight. Had you been looking, you would have seen me. You were lit by the flames and had a blanket wrapped around your shoulders ... I almost gave the mating call, which startled me so completely that I dropped to the ground. I was afraid and confused and suddenly needy. I did not know what to do. I had never experienced that before. I crawled a short distance away and sat there for quite a while, getting myself under control again. I resolved to speak with you and see whom you had become and perhaps....”

“Perhaps what?” she breathed.

“Just perhaps, I don’t know. But I knew I had to see, talk to, and hopefully, touch you. So, I hid my things and readied myself. But when I went back, you were not alone anymore. A male

Anima

had joined you, and the two of you were... cuddling,” he said, his voice flat for the first time since he had started talking.

Joyce bit her lip, disturbed but also touched that he was so obviously unhappy about the memory of the teenage Joyce snuggling another man under a blanket. Her eyes welled because she knew the summer Sung was talking about. She remembered the guy, a year older, a year further ahead at school. And he was not significant. Not at all. But for about three weeks, she had been enthralled. Utterly obsessed with him. They had dated for months; by the end, she had realised he was a pompous ass. But for that first month... it had seemed like heaven to her sixteen-year-old self. Sung had to have shown up during those weeks when there was nothing and no one else she could think about.

“It was obvious you love him. You never took your eyes off him. And your scent...” Sung grunted and turned away.

“Sung, he was a high school crush. We dated for two months. We barely even kissed.”

Sung nodded. “I can see that now. But you must understand, I had been putting off mating, not the relationship, but even the act, for years. To see you that way with him, and so focused on him... I saw it through Anima’s eyes. It seemed clear that you would have mated him if he asked you, and I thought... I thought you had forgotten me. I thought I was the stupid one who had not let go of a childhood friend. But the problem was, you were... so beautiful, Joyce. I wanted you desperately.”

He looked down as if he felt ashamed, and she gently turned his head to look at her. “I wish you had come and talked to me,” she breathed. “I wish I’d had that choice back then, Sung. Once I overcame the shock, I would have followed you if I had known,” which sparked her anger. “But you didn’t tell me. You didn’t even let me see you!”

She knew there was a fierce light in her eyes, but she was so angry! Why had he waited? Why had he not fought against his inner thoughts and approached her? Instead, she had been left with ungracious pawing and slobbering high school dates. The few that there were.

Sung stared at her. “I thought I was too late,” he simply said. “I stayed in your world for two more days. I watched your house. Though he did not stay with you, he was there often, and

Laurie Bowler

you always smiled more when he was close and hummed after he left. To my young eyes, you were... happy.”

“Sung -”

“Do not deny your attraction to that man, Joyce. I could smell it on you.”

“He was not a man; he was a boy. He wasn’t trying to be my mate; he just wanted to have sex and nothing else,” she said dryly. “I was obsessed with him for a few weeks, but then he showed me his true colours, and we broke up ... I wasn’t happy, Sung. I was sad and lonely, and... I wish you would have come a few weeks later.”

“A few weeks later, I was back in Anima, and I was king. My father was dead, and my mother was wasting away. I was convinced I would never see you again, but you had somehow become the measure by which all other females stood. And none of them did. None of them warmed my chest like the moment I saw you. I did not catch myself smiling when I thought of others. I did not... yearn.”

“How, though?” she asked. “If we had not spoken, how did you know it would be like this?” she waved a hand between them.

“It’s the call of the true mate,” he said, touching her face. She stared up into his fierce eyes, and her heart flipped. “The act of mating is nothing to be Anima, Joyce. I gave up avoiding it after that. I hoped my heart would follow if I joined my body with other females. But it never did. After years of taking any woman that offered herself, I... stopped. I was hollowed out by it all; my heart was calling for you. Despite all the mating, I still had not taken a mate or a wife, as the people called the rite. They demanded that I find my true mate from among their ranks. And I... I did not have a choice, truly. But even in my heart... I walked into that night seething. I hate the blood rites, the brutality of them. I hated giving my heart over to someone who had killed to get it, but there was no way around it. You were gone, and I was responsible to my people... and then, somehow, impossibly, you were there...” His voice had dropped to awe again.

Anima

The Final Truth – Part 3

SUNG

“It’s hard for me to explain, Joyce, how it felt to see you there that night,” he turned himself to face her, pulling one of his massive legs up so his shin rested along her thigh and he could stare her full in the face. “I had spent almost ten years reminding myself that you were gone, unattainable. That we had only been children together forced me to acknowledge that there was nothing between us. I had made myself cold,” his eyes were sad as he stroked her hair. “When it was time for the rite, I had steeled myself and forced myself to accept that this dream was impossible and it was time to move on. I had done it, too. I’d... I’d let myself make choices I would never have made. I forced myself to step out and... creator’s light, Joyce, there’s so much I would change about the period before the rite if I could and knew you would come. But that’s all in the past, and I can’t do anything about them now. I can only promise you, show you, that no one else has my heart or has ever owned it the way you do.”

She nodded sadly. “I know, Sung, I know. I believe you; I do. I just... this is so hard, and I wish it had started differently. I wish we’d had more time. I wish you would come for me. I wish I had known it was even possible! I would have tried to come to you if I had known. I always thought about you and wondered what had happened to you. And I know if I had seen you... if I had just seen you, Sung!”

That little voice inside him urged him to tell her about Lucine, to make sure she was never blindsided by that. His first instinct was to deny it; she was already sad, angry, hurting, and uncertain. But to tell her he had mated with the woman who had almost killed her... but then he stopped. He could see how his pride, assumptions and self-confidence had influenced others and the events that had brought her here. If she learned that from the wolves, it would not be kind. It was his fault she had not known everything she needed to know, and he is to blame for why she ended up in Anima under these circumstances. So, even though he could not change the past, he could change how he stepped forward into the future.

“I feel terrible, Joyce, but there is something I must tell you,” he whispered into her hair. Her head snapped up immediately, her eyes wide and wary, “what?”

Laurie Bowler

He cupped her neck and held her gaze. "Some of the choices I made when I was convinced you were never coming, and I was forced to step into a future without you... some of my actions were foolish. And others were... just wrong. And those... if they ever come out... you will be forced to face them with me," he let her see his remorse, his plea for her forgiveness and his ache to have done everything differently.

"What is it?" she whispered with fear in her voice.

Sung swallowed and dropped his hand to find hers. She let him hold her hand but never took her eyes off his face. "I told you I hate the blood rites?" She nodded. "Well... in the weeks leading up to the rite of survival, I was angry and struggling. I was forcing myself to give up on you and trying to find a way to be... enthusiastic about my future with someone else."

She sighed. "Go on."

"A few weeks before the rite, a female offered herself to me. One that I should not have touched. But I was lonely and angry, trying to convince myself that I could make it work with someone else. So, I... took what she offered."

"Who?"

Sung sighed. "Lucine."

Joyce did not move.

Anima

Laurie Bowler