

Chapter 43

The Engagement Party

On the 14th day of Desiaty Mesiac, Michael dressed in his tuxedo and drove to Amanda's apartment. He parked his car, entered the building and started climbing the stairs toward her apartment. When he reached the second floor landing, as usual, he was met by a naked Angelique Protelo. When Angelique saw Michael in his tuxedo, she chirped like her feral ancestors would do when they were confronted with an unexpected situation.

When Angelique found her voice, she said, "Michael! What are you doing in that get up?"

"Amanda was invited to an engagement party and she told me that I had to dress up as nicely as possible. Fortunately, after I woke up from stasis, the Pantheras bought me some clothes and they included this tuxedo. So, here I am."

For the first time since he'd known her, Angelique left her apartment and approached Michael. She had a faraway look in her eyes and her hand was reaching out as she walked toward him. As she approached him, Michael started stepping backward as he looked fearfully first toward Angelique's apartment and then toward Amanda's.

After a couple of seconds, Angelique said, "Michael, what's wrong? Are you afraid of me touching you?"

With a slight squeak in his voice, Michael said, "Yes."

"Why?"

"First, you're married. Second, you're naked. Third, I don't know how Oskar would react if he saw you standing close to me while you're in said state of undress. Fourth and most importantly, I don't know how Amanda would react if she stepped out of her apartment and saw you walking toward me while your naked and I'd rather not find out."

Just then, a male voice caught their attention. "Angelique, why are you harassing Michael like that? You know seeing you naked causes him mental and emotional distress."

Angelique turned her head toward the voice and said, "Oskar, come take a look at Michael's outfit."

Oskar stepped out of the apartment and stared at Michael. "What are you doing in that outfit, Michael?"

“As I told Angelique, Amanda received an invitation to an engagement party of a rather wealthy Humanimal. She told me that I need to dress up as nicely as possible. So, here I am.

“I need to go get Amanda so we aren’t late to the party.”

Angelique said, “All right, Michael. Please stop and let me see how Amanda looks before you go.”

As he started up the stairs, Michael said, “All right, Angelique.”

Michael arrived at Amanda’s door and knocked his special knock. After Amanda invited him in, Michael entered her apartment and saw her sitting on her sofa wearing nothing but her bra, panties, and a loosely tied housecoat. She didn’t seem to be in too much of a hurry to finish getting dressed. Michael sat down beside her, put his arm around her shoulders, pulled her close, and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Sweetie, you need to finish getting dressed; otherwise, we’re going to be late.”

“Michael, I don’t want to go. As I told you, I’ve only seen this guy once in my life and that was shortly after my fourteenth birthday.”

“Amanda, don’t do it for you; do it for your father.”

“Ooh! Why did you invoke my father? If you had said, ‘Do it for your mother’, I would have said, ‘No!’”

Michael laughed and said, “Why do you think I said it the way I did? Now, scoot and finish getting dressed.”

Amanda kissed Michael, stood up, and walked to her bedroom. A couple of minutes later, she returned wearing a form-fitting strapless lime green cocktail dress with slits in the sides that reached all the way up to her hips. When Michael saw her, he gave her a wolf whistle. All he could do for several seconds was stare at her causing her to do a slow pirouette to show the dress off.

Finally, Michael said, “Excuse me, Miss, did you see my fiance in there. She went in there to change clothes but, she hasn’t come out yet.”

Michael stepped past her and walked into the bedroom as Amanda glared at him. After a couple of seconds, he returned. Amanda put her hands on her hips and glared at him for several seconds before saying, “Michael!”

Michael feigned surprise and said, “Amanda!? You look so different!”

“I will bite you and you know I will.”

Michael walked up to her, put his arms around her, and kissed her. Amanda said, “Don’t try to make up to me. I’m mad at you.”

Michael looked at her with puppy dog eyes and said, “I sowwy.”

“Don’t do that, Michael.” Amanda said, somewhat plaintively.

“I not wanna make you mad. Pweese forgive me.”

Amanda looked at his sad eyes and said, “All right. You’re forgiven.” Then, she kissed him.

“But, you do look beautiful, Beautiful.”

“Thank you.” She put her forehead against his chest and added, “Do we really have to go.”

“Yes, my love. You received a personal invitation so, we need to go.”

When they reached the second floor landing, Michael said, “Hold on a second, Sweetheart. I made Angelique a promise. She wants to see us before we leave.”

Michael knocked on the Protelo apartment door and a couple of seconds later, a fully dressed Angelique opened the door. Michael and Amanda did an audible gasp as this sight.

Looking at Michael, Angelique said, “Oh, come on, you two. You’ve seen me dressed before.”

After turning her eyes to Amanda, it was Angelique’s turn to do an audible gasp. “Amanda, you look absolutely beautiful.” Turning to look inside her apartment, she said, “Oskar, you need to see Michael and Amanda.” Angelique disappeared into the apartment.

Oskar, also fully dressed, appeared in the doorway. “Whoa! You two look fantastic. If Michael hadn’t already told us why you’re dressed this way, I’d have to ask.”

“Speaking of dressed, why are you two dressed up?”

“We’ve got a dinner date. We try to go out at least once a week to keep the romance alive in our relationship.”

Angelique reappeared with a professional looking camera in her hands. “Michael, will you and Amanda pose for me. I could use this type of photograph in my portfolio.” Michael and Amanda stepped over to the wall and posed with their arms around each other and holding each other close, cheek to cheek. “Perfect.” Angelique took a few photos of them and returned the camera inside the apartment. When she returned, she said, “I’ll make copies for you two, if you’d like.”

Michael said, “I most definitely would. Amanda?”

“Me, too. Thank you, Angelique.”

As Michael and Amanda walked out of the apartment building, Michael turned and said, “Amanda, that was a professional-looking camera Angelique was using.”

“It is. She’s a professional photographer. Not long after I moved in they invited me to their apartment for dinner. During dinner, they told me about themselves. Angelique has been a professional photographer for about ten years. In fact, she’s the official photographer for the Catlanna professional sports teams. She’s called to accidents by insurance companies to take photographs for use in court cases. She also owns a photography studio a couple of miles from the apartment. I’ve heard she earns in excess of 2,000 Yenars a week.

“Oskar owns several electronics stores and gas stations. He earns in excess of 3,000 Yenars a week.” Michael whistled. “Yes, they are very well off.”

“Why do they live here?”

“It’s a nice neighborhood; the rent is relatively low; the apartment complex allows Angelique to swim in the pool naked as long as she swims between 1800 and 2300 and there are no complaints. They’re saving up the money to buy a house and land with cash.”

“Wow!”

They reached Michael’s car and got in. After cranking the car, pulling out of the parking space, and reaching the road, Amanda gave Michael the directions to the Reynard estate which was to the south of the neighborhood where they lived. As they drove along Michael was quiet because he was enjoying the company of the woman he loved and he was listening to her telling him about her day.

About an hour after leaving Amanda's apartment, they arrived at the Reynard estate. Michael pulled into the road leading to the house and, when he saw that he had to drive a half mile to reach the house, he was visibly impressed by the size of the house.

As they approached the house, Michael said, "Da-yum! That ain't no mansion; that's a bloody castle!"

Amanda said, "Well, in ancient times, the area comprising northern Gargia was a kingdom of which the Reynard family was the ruling family and they haven't forgotten. It's said that this castle is over 5,000 years old."

"Amanda, for the first time in my life, I'm completely intimidated. Look at the size of that building. It looks like it's at least 50 feet high and over 100 feet long. Oh, my God! Is that a moat surrounding the house?"

Amanda laughed and said, "Yes. The Reynard ancestors had to fight numerous wars to keep control of their kingdom. The moat made it difficult at best to reach the top of the walls. Plus, I've been told it wasn't uncommon for the Reynard kings to release hot boiling tar into the moat to make it even more difficult to mount an attack on their castle."

By this time, Michael had arrived at the front door. The doorman, a older coyote, was dressed in a uniform that reminded Michael of the ancient Beefeater uniforms of England. These uniforms differed from the ancient Beefeater uniforms in the following ways. The uniform was Bleu de France instead of English red; white stripes on the sleeves instead of black; on the left breast pocket was the Reynard family crest, a 3" round badge half Bleu de France, half white with a red fox head superimposed on it; and a white hat rather than black.

When Michael arrived, the doorman opened his door and assisted him in getting out of his car. After Michael got out of the car, the coyote stepped back to the door. As he exited, Michael noted that another doorman, this one a gray wolf, dressed in an identical uniform, was assisting Amanda in exiting the car. Michael noted that the other doorman treated Amanda with complete deference as if he was meeting a princess.

Michael waited for Amanda to arrive and offered his arm to her. When they approached the coyote and he requested an invitation. Amanda reached into her purse, retrieved the invitation and handed it to him. "Ah, Miss Fuchs." He looked at Michael curiously before continuing with, "Miss Fuchs, I was informed that you would be arriving alone."

"Mr. Wiley, if you'll read the envelope, you'll see that it's addressed to 'Amanda Fuchs and Friend'."

"I see. I'm guessing the master thought you would be escorted by a female friend."

"Mr. Wiley, Michael is my fiance."

Mr. Wiley looked his surprise. "Your . . . fiance?"

“Yes, sir. Michael and I have been engaged for about two months.”

“Oh, dear.” Under his breath, Mr. Wiley said, “The master isn’t going to like this.” He turned to a young red squirrel and, after handing the invitation to him, said, “Take this to the Crier.” Turning back to Michael and Amanda, he said, “Please follow him.”

Michael and Amanda followed the youngster into the mansion and approached a rather large European brown bear wearing a Bleu de France and gold coat, white breeches, black boots and a Bleu de France tricorn hat.. The red squirrel youngster handed him the invitation and returned through the front door.

Michael looked up at the bear who was obviously well over 7 feet tall. As Michael looked up at the bear, he slowly leaned further and further back until he almost lost his balance. This action didn’t go unnoticed by the bear who had to suppress a smile.

Whispering, the bear said, “What is wrong?”

“God! You’re a tall one.” Michael replied.

“I’m not that tall, sir. I’m only about 6’6” tall.”

Smiling, Michael said, “Oh, no you’re not. I’m 6’ tall and you’re significantly taller than I am. I’m guessing you’re at least 7’6” tall.”

Leaning slightly so only Michael could hear. The bear said, “You’re correct, sir. I’m 7’11” tall. I’ve been told that my first humanimal ancestors had a lot of rather tall human genes.”

“Ah, then you probably have Tutsi and possibly Dutch genes. Those combined with your brown bear genes make you a rather tall bear.”

“I believe I was told something like that when I was younger. Now, if you’ll excuse me, sir, I need to announce your arrival.”

The bear looked at the invitation and, after tapping his staff three times on a tile obviously designed for the purpose of increasing the sound of the tapping, announced in a loud baritone voice, “Amanda Fuchs and friend.”

As the bear spoke, Michael looked at the room where they had been led. It was huge. Michael estimated it to be at least 40 feet square and 40 feet from the floor to the ceiling. In the back of the room, he saw three levels of balconies extending from the wall. On the second floor of balconies, he saw a string quartet playing songs that reminded him of Medieval music. The dining tables were arranged in a large square he guessed was about 30 feet square with a gap at each corner to allow the servers to enter the square to serve the patrons. Despite the tables, Michael thought how much it looked like ballroom rather than a dining room.

After the bear made the announcement, another youngster, this one a raccoon girl Michael estimated to be between 10 and 12 and dressed in a Medieval-style dress motioned for them to follow her. She led them to the table at the far end of the room. When they arrived at the other end of the room, the raccoon girl handed them off to an arctic hare doe. When she saw Michael, she said, "I don't understand. Miss Fuchs, you're supposed to sit here." She indicated an empty seat. "We don't have a seat for your escort."

Michael said, "That's all right, Amanda, I can leave. You can call me when this little soiree is over and you're ready to go home."

Amanda turned to Michael and said, "Michael, if you don't stay, I don't stay." She turned and looked meaningfully at the doe.

After a couple of seconds of indecision, the doe said, "Come with me." She led them to one of the tables on the other side of the room.

As they walked to the other table, Michael was surveying the room and came to the realization that the guests were the upper crust of the city of Catlanna if not the entire province of Gargia. However, he was surprised to see Jacob and Ophelia Fuchs. Unlike her normal death stare glare, Ophelia was giving Michael a knowing smile that cause him a bit of consternation because he couldn't understand why she would smile at him like that. He also noticed Drs. Leo and Tigresa Panthera, Mr. Blaid, Mr. Schimpanse, Mrs. Gatopardos, and the other vice-presidents of SoGa Industries and their spouses. He couldn't understand why the Fuchses were at this party almost as much as why Amanda was invited.

When Michael and Amanda reached the other side of the dining room, the doe asked one of the people sitting alone if she would be interested in sitting at the head table. The young woman, a field mouse, gladly gave up her seat to Michael so he and Amanda could sit together. The doe then led the mouse back to the seat that had been reserved for Amanda.

After assisting Amanda in sitting down, Michael took his seat. After everyone was seated, from the front of the room, a loud tapping was heard and a loud voice announced, "Reginald Francis Reynard, III". Michael looked toward the front of the tables and noticed a young Arctic fox in his winter coat and dressed to the nines. He approached the table and, when he noticed the mouse woman, he suddenly looked around the room. Amanda barely noticed but Michael recognized that look. After his eyes locked on her, Michael realized that Mr. Reynard was looking for Amanda. However, before he could walk over to them, dinner was served.

The servers arrived in waves. Each server brought a different dish for the patrons. The main course consisted of 2 slices of broiled beef brisket, 4 slices of sliced turkey breast, 4 slices of broiled pork tenderloin, cream-style corn, sweet potato souffle, succotash, and turnip greens. Michael was a bit surprised at some of the choices for their meal but, he enjoyed the meal while listening to the soothing music being played by the string quartet.

After everybody had had a chance of eating their meal, the servers returned and removed the dishes. Other servers arrived with dessert. Once again, Michael was surprised at the

simplicity of the dessert which consisted of strawberry shortcake and peach cobbler. Then, the servers returned and removed the dessert plates and brought coffee cups and offered everyone coffee. Michael politely refused because he didn't drink coffee but, he sat and enjoyed the music.

Several seconds later, Michael turned to Amanda and said, "Amanda, would you like to dance? That music is perfect for dancing."

Shocked, Amanda replied, "Michael, nobody dances at a Reynard dinner party."

"Amanda, look at this room. This isn't a dining room; it's a ballroom. There's a string quartet playing soft dance music. Why shouldn't we use this room the way it was intended to be used. Maybe we can get all these other stuffed shirts to loosen up and enjoy themselves for a change."

Michael held his hand toward Amanda. She looked at it for a couple of seconds before taking it and allowing him to help her stand. He led her to one of the openings between the tables and, after bowing to her like a proper gentleman, took her into his arms and they started dancing. They danced around the floor inside the tables.

As they danced, Michael heard people whispering. Some whispers approved on their actions; some disapproved; some were fearful of what would happen to him and Amanda. Michael didn't care what people thought. After all, he was holding the woman he loved in his arms and was enjoying feeling her body close to his as they made spectacles of themselves dancing around the ballroom in front of the cream of Gargia society. As long as Amanda was happy, Michael didn't give a hoot what anyone else thought. Making her happy was the greatest thing he could think of doing.

Michael and Amanda danced in front of her parents and Michael heard Ophelia speaking in a harsh whisper, "How dare he make a mockery of this party and embarrass my daughter like that!"

Jacob replied, "I don't think Amanda's embarrassed in the least, Ophelia. In fact, she's looking at Michael the way you look at me when we dance."

Ophelia's reaction her typical, "Humph!"

Michael couldn't hear any more of their conversation because he and Amanda had danced too far away but, they passed close to Leo and Tigresa and he saw them smiling approvingly at them. Soon they reached a middle-age Arctic fox couple. Michael assumed it was the parents of the lucky guy who was to announce his engagement tonight. He looked at the couple and he saw the husband smiling while the wife was looking at them in shock.

As they neared Mr. and Mrs. Reynard, Michael heard Mrs. Reynard say, "Reginald! They're making a mockery of this party!"

Reginald said, “Velma, the human knows what our family has forgotten. He knows that his is a ballroom, not a dining room. Father decided to use this ballroom as a dining room shortly after he took over the family business to intimidate people into doing his bidding.” He thought for a couple of seconds before saying, “Come on, Love, let’s join them.”

Velma looked at her husband for a couple of seconds and the look of shock slowly faded from her face. Finally, she smiled and said, “Yes, let’s.”

As Michael and Amanda passed the Reynard parents, they saw them stand up, walk through one of the gaps, and join them on the dance floor. Soon every couple at the party had joined Michael and Amanda, except for Reginald Francis Reynard, III, who had invited Amanda to this Engagement Party. Michael also heard him fuming.

“What does that human think he’s doing!? He’s making a mockery of this party! Does he not know that nobody dances at a Reynard function!? And my own parents have decided to ridicule me by joining him!” This little speech caused Michael to intensely dislike him but, as a guest, he decided to keep his opinion of the spoiled brat to himself at least until he and Amanda were one their way back to her apartment.

As he was thinking these thoughts, Michael and Amanda passed close to Leo and Tigresa. He smiled at them and said, “I believe that this is the first time I’ve ever seen you two out at night and not have six cubs in tow.”

Leo smiled and said, “When we received the invitation, we decided we wanted to see who the woman was that would be willing to marry that” (Tigresa poked him in the ribs as she smiled sweetly.) “young man.”

Michael and Amanda laughed and continued dancing. Soon, they neared Mr. and Mrs. Reynard. Mr. Reynard got Michael’s attention and the couples neared each other. When they got close enough to each other to allow it, Mr. Reynard spoke.

“Young man, I want to thank you for reminding this old fox of the proper way to enjoy a party. I’m Reginald Reynard, II.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Reynard. I’m Michael Thomson; this is my fiancée, Amanda Fuchs.”

“Pleased to meet you as well, Mr. Thomson. Is that Thomson like . . .”

“The gazelle. Yes, sir.”

Mr. Reynard looked toward Amanda and noticed her giving a slight shake of her head. He said, “Pleased to meet you as well, Amanda.”

Amanda said “Likewise, Mr. Reynard.”

Occasionally, as they danced, Michael would look toward the head table and saw the younger Reginald glaring at him. He knew the glare was directed toward him because Reginald followed their every move as they moved across the floor. Every now and then, Reginald would start to rise but always sat back down. Finally, Michael noticed him talking to the young field mouse who had been moved to the seat that was originally reserved for Amanda.

Reginald said, "Do you mind if I ask you why you're sitting there? That seat was reserved for Amanda Fuchs."

Shyly, the mouse replied, "I was sitting in my reserved seat when I was informed that I was going to be moved to this seat because a tigress and her escort needed to sit next to each other."

"Which tigress? Where?"

"The one dancing with the human."

"Really? Well, if you'll excuse me, I have something I must attend to."

Reginald arose and made his way to Michael and Amanda. When he arrived, he said to Michael, "Do you mind if I cut in?"

Michael didn't care for Reginald from a distance; up close, he absolutely detested him. Reginald gave off an air of privilege that most wealthy Humanimals that Michael had met didn't seem to have. Even Reginald's parents didn't have this air of privilege. However, Michael also knew that sometimes first impressions were incorrect so, he said, "That's up to Amanda, Mr. Reynard."

Reginald said to Amanda, "Do you mind if I cut in?"

Amanda looked at Michael fearfully and questioningly but said, "If Michael doesn't mind, I suppose it's all right."

As Reginald and Amanda danced away, Michael made his way back to his seat. He had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach but, he couldn't think of any good reason for it. He was thinking, "If this is Reginald's engagement party, shouldn't he be dancing with his fiancée? But, perhaps Humanimal tradition are completely different from human traditions." He sat down and watched as Reginald danced with Amanda toward the head table. Just as they reached Reginald's seat, the music stopped and everyone returned to their respective seats.

With his arm around Amanda's waist, an action that caused Amanda to glare at him, Reginald cleared his throat for attention and said, "Ladies, Gentlemen, and the cream of Catlanna society, you were invited here tonight to hear a very important announcement."

The timing of Reginald's statement caused Michael to start to become nervous. Out of the corner of his eye, Michael noticed Ophelia looking at him instead of Reginald. He also noticed a malevolent look on her face. He thought, "What's going on with her?"

Reginald continued, "For the 24 years of my life, I have been considered the most eligible bachelor in Catlanna if not all of Gargia. Well, unfortunately for all but one very lucky lady, that's soon to come to an end. As your invitation stated, this party tonight is to announce my engagement to be married. What wasn't stated on the invitation was the name of the lovely lady who, in just a few short months, will be Mrs. Reginald Francis Reynard, III."

Michael was thinking, "Something's not right here. He's got his arm around Amanda's waist and announcing who he's engaged to marry." A light suddenly dawned on Michael. "Oh! No! It can't be!" He looked toward Ophelia and saw an utterly malicious grin on her face. Rather than hear what he knew was about to be said, Michael quietly and quickly stood and left. Michael was gone and missed what happened next.

Reginald continued, "The future Mrs. Reginald Francis Reynard, III, is none other than the beautiful woman that I've got my arm around, Amanda Marie Fuchs." He turned a surprised Amanda toward him and, while everyone clapped happily, kissed her passionately with her struggling to escape his grasp the entire time. Finally, after several seconds, Amanda managed to extricate herself from Reginald's grasp. Amanda took a step back, wound up, and, before Reginald could react, hit him with a haymaker, and dropped him like a sack of potatoes. After Amanda knocked him down, she stood over him, pointed her finger at him and said, "I told you four years ago to never kiss me without my permission."

Amanda looked toward her mother and said, "This is your doing but, this marriage will never happen."

Finally, she rushed toward the front door, pausing only long enough to not run into her mother who was trying to prevent her from leaving. Unfortunately, by the time Amanda reached the front door, Michael was pulling out of the driveway. As she watched him leaving, Amanda started staggering as tears began filling her eyes. She would have fallen down if Mr. Wiley hadn't caught her. She turned, buried her face in his chest, and started crying harder than she had since she was a kid.

"I can't believe he would do this." She sobbed. "I thought he loved me more than that."

"What happened, Miss Fuchs?"

"Reginald told everyone that I was his fiancée. When Michael heard that, he turned and left. Why would he do that? I love him."

“Aren’t you engaged to the young master?”

“No! I don’t even like him!” She snarled.

“Perhaps your friend doesn’t know that and he didn’t want to give anyone the wrong impression.”

Just then, Reginald, who had regained consciousness and was staggering slightly, appeared behind them. “Your opinion doesn’t matter, Wiley.”

“Of course, sir.”

Mr. Wiley walked away and Reginald approached Amanda. “Don’t you come near me!” Amanda said as she slowly backed away from him.

“Amanda, you don’t have a way home. Let me call my driver and I’ll take you home.”

“I can call a taxi.”

Reginald laughed and said, “Amanda, every taxi company in Catlanna has been told that they are not to enter our gates for any reason. So, it would be easier for you to accept my offer.”

Amanda closed her eyes and turned her head away from Reginald. After several seconds, she said, “All right, Reginald. But, we go nowhere but to my apartment complex.”

“Don’t worry, Amanda. I’ll instruct the driver to go directly to your apartment complex.”

“Thank you, Reginald.”

Reginald turned and walked back inside the house.