

Chapter 59

Michelle's Family

The reception was catered by the most expensive caterer in Catlanna. Mr. Blaidd had said that his silent partners had said that they wished to do something for all the couples getting married and paying for the catering of the wedding receptions was what they had decided to do. Even though the caterers were the most expensive in Catlanna, they catered any kind of party from a multi-millionaire's birthday party to a small gathering for a family that made less than 50,000 Yenars a year. Since the tastes of Michelle and Albert weren't on the same plane as the Reynard family, the caterers adjusted their menu accordingly.

After everyone had entered the reception hall, Amanda attached herself to Michael's arm causing him to smile happily. However, when he looked into her eyes, he saw the glare that he had seen earlier. His only thought was, "Oops."

"What were you thinking about when you were supposed to give the wedding band to the Padre?"

"You won't believe me."

"Try me."

"I was thinking about which wedding ceremony we should use."

"I don't believe you."

"See?"

"Michael, for the last three months, you've been picking on Michelle because of the way that she looks while she's pregnant."

"I know but, I had already picked on her this morning. To tell the truth, I believe she enjoys it."

"Why?"

"Because I'm the reason she's pregnant." He paused a second before saying, "Wait a minute. That sounds wrong."

"You think?"

"I mean, if it hadn't been for me, she would have never given Albert a chance and become pregnant as a result. Sound better?"

Amanda slipped her arms around his waist as she said, "Much."

Just then, the Padre walked up and Amanda gave Michael a quick kiss and made her excuses as she left to find Wanda and Bertha. The Padre said, “I don’t think she feels comfortable around me.”

“You know why, Padre.”

“Yes. I didn’t know that she didn’t agree to the arranged marriage until you proved it in the hospital room.”

“I know and she knows. Just give her time, Padre. Amanda easily forgives anyone who upsets her. God knows I know from experience.

“So, is it true that each Padre is trained in a specific marriage ceremony?”

“Well, yes and no.”

The look on Michael’s face said, “Please clarify.”

“What I mean is, in seminary, like at college, we have a major and a minor in wedding ceremonies. We do this in case we are called to a parish which might not need someone who is trained in the Traditional Modern ceremony. My major was the Modern Traditional, the ceremony Albert and Michelle chose but I’m more often asked to do the Traditional Modern ceremony.”

“But, don’t you have books to follow?”

“Yes, but we use those only to refresh our memories of how the ceremony goes.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes.” He leaned close to Michael’s ear and added, “Truth be told, most of the time we’re only concerned with the vows and, since most people don’t know the complete ceremony, we can ad lib the rest.”

As the Padre arose, Michael stifled a laugh. “Is that what you did today?”

“Actually, at my age, I’ve read and performed both ceremonies enough that I’ve got about 95% of them committed to memory.”

At that moment, a female honey badger walked up and gave the Padre a kiss. The Padre slipped his arms around her waist and looked lovingly into her eyes. Without taking his eyes off her, the Padre said, “Michael, I’d like you to meet my lovely wife, Theresa. Theresa, this is the oldest living thing on Earth, Michael Thomson.”

Theresa extended her hand toward Michael who took it and gave it a gentlemanly kiss. As Michael kissed her hand, she said, “Thomson? Like the . . .”

“Gazelle, yes, ma’am.”

“What did Bernard mean when he said you were the oldest living thing on Earth?”

Michael, despite his shock that she didn't know about him, took her question in stride and said, "I'm over 20,000 years old. I spent most of the last 20,000 years in stasis because of the HEV."

"Oh, you're that Michael Thomson. Please forgive my being a bit of a scatterbrain today. I've been rather busy taking care of our cubs. If you'll excuse me . . ." She walked over to Albert and Michelle and started talking to them.

Bernard watched her walk away and, before Michael could say anything, said, "I know what you're thinking, Michael, and you couldn't be more wrong. Theresa is quite intelligent but, she seems to have a problem out in public."

"What do you mean?"

"At home, she's super efficient and just as intelligent but, in public, she becomes ditsy and scatterbrained. Before we left home to come to the wedding, she was telling me how she could hardly wait to meet you."

"Interesting. You don't think she's xenophobic, do you?"

"No. If we had held the reception in our home, she would be the efficient, intelligent woman I described earlier. And before you ask, she isn't agoraphobic either. She practically races me out of the house when we go somewhere."

"Hmm. What's she like at home?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is she domineering, submissive?"

"She's a loving, caring woman."

"What kind of wedding ceremony did you have?"

"She insisted on . . . a . . . Wait. Are you implying . . .?"

"She insisted on a Traditional Wedding, didn't she?"

"Are you saying the way she is away from home is an . . . act?"

"Not really. She may not realize what she's doing. She may want you to think she's the perfect wife and she may believe, for whatever reason, that to be the perfect wife she has to seem less intelligent than you."

"But, that isn't true."

"I know."

"What should I do?"

“That’s up to you but, personally, if I was you, I would walk up to her, put my arms around her, and whisper in her ear how much I love her and especially how much I love how intelligent she is. I’d include that I want everyone to know how lucky I am to have such an intelligent wife.”

“Do you think that will work?”

“As humans used to say, ‘Couldn’t hoit.’”

Padre Bernard looked at Michael questioningly and Michael said, “It couldn’t hurt.”

“All right. I’ll try it.”

Padre Bernard walked over to his wife, put his arms around her, kissed her, and whispered into her ear. After he did this, she looked at him, smiled, and hugged him tightly. She hooked her arm around his and never left his side the rest of the night.

After Padre Bernard left, Amanda seemed to appear out of nowhere and slipped her arm around Michael’s waist. Michael smiled at her as he put his arm around her shoulders. “What were you and the Padre talking about, Michael?” She asked.

“Different things. One was how you’ve been avoiding him today.”

“I’m not avoiding him.”

Michael smiled and said, “Well, why did you leave when he approached?”

“I had to talk to Wanda and Bertha about their weddings next weekend.”

Michael smiled and said, “Right. And right after Padre Bernard left, you reappear at my side.”

Michael pulled her in front of him and kissed her. “Sweetheart, I’m not saying you’re doing it intentionally. In fact, I doubt very seriously you are but, the facts prove otherwise.”

“What do you mean?”

“I never saw you look at him, even once, during the wedding ceremony.”

“Oh! You’re right. Are you saying I’m angry with him about trying to marry me to Reginald?”

“Are you?”

Amanda thought for several seconds before saying, “Well, maybe a little.”

“Don’t worry. He understands and hopes you’ll forgive him since he didn’t know you were being forced to marry Reginald.”

“Speaking of the wedding ceremony, what happened earlier. Why did you miss your cue to give the Padre Albert’s wedding band?”

“As I said, I was thinking about our upcoming wedding and which ceremony we should use.”

“I was thinking of using the Traditional Modern Ceremony.”

“You mentioned that one to me but, we were interrupted by a certain two-year-old. So, what’s the Traditional Modern Ceremony?”

“It takes the best parts of the Traditional and Modern Traditional Ceremonies and discards the parts that a lot of people don’t like. For example, it keeps the challenge but eliminates tying the bride’s wrists.”

“Even though her wrists are bound to her fiancé’s wrists?”

“It’s the idea of having wrists bound as humans used to do to their Humanimal slaves.”

Michael looked at Amanda, grinned broadly, and said, “So, you aren’t into bondage?”

Looking at him with half-closed eyes, Amanda grinned equally broadly and responded saying, “Only if it’s me tying you up so I can have my way with you.”

They heard a familiar male voice say, “Michael, are you trying to corrupt my daughter?”

“Never would I ever, Mr. Fuchs. I think she’s trying to corrupt me.” Michael replied, smiling.

Amanda said, “Don’t believe him, Daddy. I’m still your sweet, innocent little girl.”

She fluttered her eyes at Jacob who said, “Right.”

Michael said, “What are you doing here, Mr. Fuchs?”

“Humanimal tradition allows immediate family members of anyone in the wedding party to receive an invitation to the wedding.”

Michael swallowed nervously and said, “Really? That means Mrs. Fuchs . . .”

“Is here. Yes.”

Michael looked around as he said, “Is she avoiding me?”

“No. She saw someone she wanted to talk to. She’ll be here momentarily.”

“Maybe I should leave. I know how she feels about me.”

“Michael, Ophelia has had a complete change of attitude.”

Amanda said, “What happened?”

“You can thank your fiancé for that.”

Michael and Amanda responded simultaneously, “What?”

“When she saw how hard Michael worked to get you out of that arranged marriage, she told me that, perhaps, she had been mistaken about him.”

“I’ll go and tell her I forgive her for all the things she said to me.”

Michael took a step before Jacob caught his arm. “No, Michael. That’s the wrong thing to do.”

“But . . .”

“No, Michael. I’ve lived with that woman for 20 years. I know how she thinks and, right now, she thinks you hate her.”

“But . . .”

“Listen to me, Michael! She doesn’t like her mistakes being aired in public. When she’s ready to ask you to forgive her, she’ll come to you and ask for your forgiveness, but, not one second beforehand.”

“I just don’t want her to think I hate her.”

“I believe she already knows that, Michael. That’s another reason she wouldn’t appreciate you reminding her of how she treated you.”

“You know her better than I do, sir. Just let her know that I don’t feel any ill will toward her.”

“I will, Michael.”

Suddenly, Ophelia appeared wrapping her arm around Jacob’s. When she saw Michael, instead of frowning, she smiled at him and Amanda. That was surprising enough but, what really threw them off was that it wasn’t a conniving, cunning smile; it was a genuinely warm smile. “Michael, Amanda, I’m so happy to see you.”

Michael smiled back equally warmly and replied, “Mrs. Fuchs, I’m glad to see you.”

Even though Jacob had prepared her, Amanda was too shocked to respond for a moment. Finally, she said, “Who are you and what have you done with my mother?”

Instead of becoming angry or even frowning, a look of sadness crossed Ophelia’s face. “I don’t blame you for having that attitude toward me. I’ve never shown you the love you wanted and deserved. I’ve said some very hurtful and hateful things to and about you and Michael. I couldn’t see the tears and sadness in your eyes, Amanda, and Michael, for his part, only looked at me with sympathy. I believe that was what I hated the most about him, Sweetheart.

“Even though I knew he had absolutely nothing to do with how our ancestors, both feral and Humanimal, were treated by humans, I blamed him because he was a convenient scapegoat. When I saw the love in his eyes for you, I didn’t see love; I saw lust, or worse, as desire to make a fur coat out of you, Amanda.”

Tears started forming in Ophelia’s eyes as she continued, “But, the most painful thing was when, on the day we saw him in your apartment, you said you hated me and he told you that you shouldn’t hate me because he didn’t have a mother to be angry with and I could see the sadness in his eyes.”

Ophelia turned to Michael and, through her tears, said, “Michael, can you find it in your heart to forgive this stupid, racist woman?”

Michael stepped over to her, put his arms around her, hugged her as a son would hug his mother, and said, “Mrs. Fuchs, I have absolutely no problem forgiving you. All I would ask of you is for you to accept me as your son-in-law.”

As Ophelia lay her head against Michael’s chest, she said, “I’m still having a hard time accepting that idea, Michael, but, if you give me time, I’ll do my best.”

“I can’t ask for anything more, Mrs. Fuchs.”

Jacob hugged Amanda and said, “You take care of this man, Baby, and I’m sure he’ll always do whatever it takes to make you happy.” He shook Michael’s hand and, putting his arm around his very pregnant wife, walked toward Edward and Susan Blaid.

Almost immediately after Jacob and Ophelia left, a cheetah walked up to Michael and Amanda. Michael recognized him as the cheetah that challenged Albert. When the cheetah got close enough, he stuck out his hand and said, “My daughter says you are the world famous Michael Thomson. Is that true?”

Michael smiled as he took the cheetah’s hand and said, “I don’t know about ‘world famous’; I don’t even know about locally famous but, I am Michael Thomson.”

“Michelle told her mother and me about you. She says you’re over 20,000 years old. Is that true?”

According to the timer on the sarcophagus I slept in I should be around 20,063 years old. I tell everyone that I’m 20,022 years old. It’s less confusing if I say I was in stasis for exactly 20,000 years.”

“And you were 22 when you were diagnosed with the HEV?”

“A couple of weeks shy of my 22nd birthday, yes sir.”

“Interesting. So, you missed the creation of the Humanimals?”

“I slept right through it.”

“Where did they find you?”

“I was in the Mysterious Mountains. They found me on one of the lower levels of one of the buildings, I mean mountains.”

Mr. Ingulule laughed and said, “Oh, we know they’re buildings. I was on an archaeological dig here about a year before I met Christine but, I was several miles away from where you had been found.”

“Yes. If those buildings are what I believe they are, you could have been as much as 30 miles away from where I had been found.”

“We were close to the center of the Mysterious Mountains. I believe one of the professors mentioned to us that we were about 4 miles from the building where ‘the human from 20,000 years ago was found’. I had hoped to make a visit to where you were found but we weren’t allowed to go there. It was supposed to be dangerous until the building could be shored up and not risk caving in.”

“I didn’t know about that.

“So, you’re Michelle’s step-father.”

“Yes, my name is Henry Ingulule. I met Christine while I was still in college. I immediately fell in love with her and Michelle. Christine was concerned because I was 20 and she was a 23-year-old widow and had a 4-year-old daughter. It took a lot of talking but, I finally convinced her to go out with me.”

“Why didn’t she want to go out with you?”

Henry laughed and said, “She’s three years older than me. She was a widow and had a 4-year-old daughter. She was afraid I was only interested in a good time and she wanted someone to be by her side for the rest of her life. After pestering her for about three months, she finally gave in and went out with me. I think it helped when I said I would be more than happy for her daughter to come along.

“After dating for a year, Christine and I got married. We had to depend on her salary while I finished my college schooling but, she was willing to work to support us while we waited. We never realized how us being married would cause Michelle trouble as she grew up.”

Amanda said, “Yes, she told us about the rape.”

“It was deeper than that, Amanda. Because servals and cheetahs are cats with small solid spots on our fur, everyone claimed that Michelle was a mix of serval and cheetah, even people who knew her before Christine and I got married. Naturally, because of the rumors about mixed race Humanimals, Michelle had to endure taunts about her sexual proclivities, even though she was a virgin and as young as 6 and 7-years-old. Even cubs who had known her before Christine met me were taunting her. Boys and girls were touching her in a sexual manner. She was so shy in school she refused to participate in any school activity.

“When that 16-year-old caracal started showing interest in her, she started to show signs of happiness I hadn’t seen since Christine and I started dating; however, that changed the day Christine and I got home from work and found her huddled on her bed in the middle of a stain that could have only been created one way. She was crying her eyes out which told me she wasn’t a willing participant to what had happened. When we managed to get the story out of her, we called the police and reported that she had been raped. The Emergency Medical Technicians performed a rape verification test on her and told us that she had indeed been raped. They asked if she knew who had raped her and, when she told them, they looked at her in shock but, they dutifully filed the rape test. Later, her rapist was arrested and arraigned on rape charges. But, when the case went to court, every one of the EMTs and police officers swore they had seen no evidence of rape; the caracal was found not guilty and released. As he passed Michelle, I heard him say, ‘I warned you to not tell anyone. Now, you know why.’ Then, he laughed as he walked away.

“A few months later, we heard he had been accused of rape once again. Once again, everyone said there was no evidence of rape. A short while after that trial, it was reported in the newspaper that every bone in both of his legs had been broken, including his kneecaps.”

Michael spoke up, saying, “That sounds like what organized crime bosses would do to people they were teaching a lesson to.”

“Funny you should say that. That girl who accused him of rape was the daughter of one of the local crime bosses.”

“Uh-oh.”

Amanda said, “Michael, what’s wrong with that.”

“It would seem, Sweetheart, that some things never change. If he really did rape that girl, he’s lucky he got away with his life.”

“While he was in the hospital, one of the nurses said that he was visited by a dire wolf who was accompanied by two polar bears. The bears stood guard on the door and wouldn’t let anyone in, even the nurses. But, while the dire wolf was in the room, one of the bears opened the door and walked in. About two minutes later, the bear returned to his post. A minute later the dire wolf left the room and, accompanied by the polar bears, left the hospital.

About an hour after the dire wolf and polar bears left, the caracal called the Provincial Department of Investigation. Half-an-hour later, four GBI officers arrived and entered the room. While the GBI officers were in the room, he signed a statement admitting to raping no less than ten women, including Michelle and two teachers. He also admitted that his father, a wealthy business man, had bribed the judges, police chief, chief of paramedics, and several jurors in each of his trials. This confession exonerated Michelle but the damage had been done. She was deathly afraid of any male, except me, her grandfathers, and her brothers, and she was especially afraid of caracals, male or female.”

“It’s sad to know that Humanimals inherited that negative trait from their human DNA donors.”

“What do you mean?”

“Judging someone by their looks or ancestry rather than how the person acts. I guess it’s a form of xenophobia.”

“No, Michael. I believe it goes much deeper than that. I believe it’s a form of dominance.”

“Kind of like bullying?”

“Sort of. Not much written history exists from before the ‘Dark Times’; however, oral traditions do exist and one thing I know is that after the Humanimals were created, we were considered more than animals but less than humans. Therefore, we were exempt from Slavery Laws because we weren’t quite human and we were exempt from Bestiality Laws because we were more than animals.”

“Oh, God, no.”

“Oh, yes. Because a number of humans were curious about that sort of thing, we were sold as slaves and put to use satisfying those desires. In other were, we were sex slaves. Later, it was discovered that due to similar genetic makeup, humans and Humanimals could produce fertile young together. Then, humans started actively trying to reproduce with us. Those children were put to work as sex slaves as soon as they reached puberty. At least the humans respected us that much. It was those young ones that led to the belief that mixed race Humanimals were sexually aggressive even though it couldn’t be further from the truth and that, Michael, is what led to Michelle’s rape.”

“Oh. Wow.” Michael said with disbelief in his voice. “I’m glad I was in stasis during those times.” Smiling, he added, “Of course, if I hadn’t been in stasis, I would have been dead for over 500 years.”

Henry laughed and said, “That’s true.”

Amanda said, “Don’t encourage him, Mr. Ingulule. He’s bad enough when we ignore him.”

Just then, Michelle walked up accompanied by a serval lady. She stopped a couple of steps away from Michael and Amanda and said, “Michael, Amanda, I want to introduce you to my mother, Christine Tierboskat-Ingulule. Mom, these are two of my closest friends, Michael Thomson and Amanda Fuchs.”

Christine held out her hand and Michael and Amanda each shook it as Christine said, “I’m happy to meet the two of you. Michelle has told us so much about you two.

“Michael, is it true that you’re over 20,000 years old?”

“That what we assume. We don’t have an accurate amount of time that I was in stasis, so we just say I was in the sarcophagus for 20,000 years.”

Christine said, “Michelle told us you two are engaged. When will you be getting married?”

Amanda replied, “In about three months.”

Henry said, “Three months!? Are you two . . .”

Michael smiled as Amanda said in a frustrated voice, “NO! I can’t convince him that it’s all right.”

Christine said, “How long have you been engaged?”

Michael said, “About six months.”

Henry said, “Wait a minute. You have experienced two heat cycles together and you still haven’t slept together?”

Michael said, “Actually, sir, we have slept together, several times.”

“What!? I don’t understand.”

“We went to Jaguarville on a business trip when she was in heat. I allowed her to sleep in bed with me during her heat on the condition that we were dressed and no sex was involved.”

“And she agreed?”

“Yes. It was important to her that I be there during her heat, more important than having sexual relations.”

Amanda whined and said, “More than that. I’ve had five heat cycles since we met and he absolutely refuses to accept my offers of my body.”

“Now, Sweetheart, tell them the reason.”

“He says he was taught to respect me and my future husband, even if that husband is him. He also says that since I’m still a virgin I should hold onto it until my wedding night.”

“Wow! Christine and I . . .” When he saw Michelle looking at him, Henry stopped talking.

“Dad, I knew you and mom were having sex.” Michelle laughed. “After all, mom was a young woman and she had needs. She had been ignoring them to take care of me and when you came along, I saw how she looked at you. So, I wasn’t surprised when you started spending the night with her.” Christine and Henry looked at one another at this revelation.

Christine looked at Michael and asked, “Michael, why do you want to wait until your wedding night? Don’t you find her desirable?”

Michael looked at Amanda as he said, “Yes, I do. She’s the most desirable woman I’ve ever known. But, I want her to know that I love her so much that I won’t ask her to risk something happening and we can’t get married as we planned.”

Henry said, “What do you mean?”

“Well, suppose I die unexpectedly. After all, I was a guinea pig 20,000 years ago. I was the first, and as far as I know, the only human that ever underwent stasis. Dr. Broadhurst even told me and

my parents that he didn't know how stasis would affect me after I woke up. I could live longer than the normal life expectancy or I could die any day. I don't want to take Amanda's virginity and then not live long enough to marry her."

Amanda looked at Michael and said, "Why didn't you tell me this sooner?"

"I don't know, Amanda. It just occurred to me, I guess."

Amanda put her arms around Michael and looked into his eyes for several seconds. Then, she kissed him and said, "Thank you, Michael. I believe I can wait three more months OR we could get married sooner." She smiled knowingly at Michael.

Michael kissed the end of her nose and said, "Whatever you want to do, Sweetie Pie. Of course, if we did that, it might throw a monkey wrench into everyone's plans."

Michelle said, "He's right, you know. I don't think Mr. Blaidd would appreciate all four of us getting married in the same month."

With a sad look on her face, Amanda replied, "I know. That's what makes this so monumentally frustrating. Every time I think I've come up with a good excuse for us to have sex, he comes up with a better one for us to wait."

She noticed Michael smiling and said, "Oh, stop laughing."

Michael said, "But, hon . . . "

"Oh, don't 'but, hon' me." She tightened her grip around him and added, "But, we've waited this long; I guess I can wait three more months."

Henry leaned over and whispered into Michelle's ear, "Are they always like this?"

"No, sir. Normally, they're worse."

"I foresee an interesting marriage between those two."

A couple of hours later, Albert and Michelle were ready to leave on their honeymoon. All the bridesmaids gathered together and Michelle turned her back toward them. She tossed her bouquet and without even moving an inch, Amanda caught it. Everyone looked at Michael expecting to see him panic but, all he did was smile happily.

After Michelle threw her bouquet, Albert guided her to a chair and she put her foot in the chair's seat. Albert reached under her dress and removed her garter. Then, like Michelle, Albert turned his back toward the groomsmen and threw the garter over his head. Call it luck or call it fate, but, like Amanda, Michael stood in place and the garter landed in his hands. Of course, the fact that everyone backed away from him just as they had done for Amanda may have had something to do with it.

After Michael caught the garter, he walked over to Amanda, put his arm around her and placed the garter around her upper arm as was Humanimal wedding tradition. After Michael did this, Michelle walked over to her parents, hugged them and her sisters and brothers, and, holding hands with Albert, left the chapel's reception room. They got into Albert's car and, after waving to everyone, drove away.