

Chapter 60

A Gathering of Families

Talking on the telephone, Tigresa was saying, “No! Don’t you dare give me any excuses! You bring your butt and everything attached to it over here tonight! You got that, young man!?”

Laughter could be heard coming out of the earpiece followed by, “Young man? Me?”

Smiling, Tigresa said, “You know what I mean, Michael. And don’t forget to pick Amanda up. We have something very important to discuss with the two of you after dinner. Besides, Anne is very unhappy that her brother and ‘Manna’ haven’t visited in so long. And if you don’t get your fur-less monkey butt over here before quick, I might just decide to find out why my feral ancestors loved to eat monkeys. Got it?”

“Yes ma’am! Pick up Amanda and get my fur-less monkey butt and everything attached over there before quick! On my way, ma’am!”

Tigresa hung up the telephone and heard a familiar male voice say, “Don’t you think you were a little rough on him, Tigresa?”

“Sometimes you have to lay down the law with him, Jacob. He wants to spend so much time with Amanda that he tends to forget that he has friends and family that would like to see him occasionally.”

Tigresa looked into the living room and asked, “How is Ophelia taking it? Michael and Amanda getting married, I mean.”

“Believe it or not, she hasn’t gotten upset about it in over 3 months.”

“I don’t know what to say. She hasn’t made the first offhand comment to me or Susan in that time. Do you have any idea why she’s acting so nice to everyone?”

“I don’t know for sure, Tigresa, but, I think Michael has proven to her that he can be trusted. I believe the incident with the Arranged Marriage Contract showed her she was wrong about him. I believe that now she realizes that Michael’s love for Amanda is real.”

“I hope Ophelia will willingly offer her suggestions for the reception.

“Oh! By the way, when are you going to tell Micheal the truth?”

“Until they get married secrets will remain secrets. I don’t want him to blame Amanda for my secrets.”

Just then, Richard appeared in the doorway. “Mom,” he said, “Dad said we could go hogtie Michael and force him to come here tonight. He also said we could call Amanda and tell her that we’ve kidnapped Michael and her presence at dinner was the ransom.” Richard was fighting laughter

as he delivered his message.

Right behind Richard, a jaguar appeared and with a Brazilian-Portuguese accent said, “Richard, don’t you dare listen to your father. You know he is trying to get you into trouble.”

Putting his arm around her, Richard said, “Don’t you worry, Maria. I know what he’s trying to do. He’s aggravated Michael almost since the day he arrived in our home.” Then, Richard whispered into her ear, “Besides, it would probably take all the males in this house to hold Michael down. He’s a tough character.” Then, he looked into the living room and, smiling, said, “Or one two-and-a-half-year-old.”

Tigresa and Jacob laughed as they returned to the living room. When they arrived, a very pregnant Ophelia took Jacob’s arm and laid her head on his shoulder. “Are they on their way?” She asked.

“Tigresa told him that Anne was begging for him to come over. As much as Michael loves Anne, he’s probably on his way over here right now.”

“He really loves Anne, doesn’t he?”

“According to Leo, Anne adopted Michael the day he arrived here. Michael accepted her and became another big brother to her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Michael doesn’t have any living family. When he awoke from stasis, Leo and Tigresa decided to adopt him and accept him as part of their family. When they brought him home that night, Anne walked up to him and asked him to hold her. As he held her, she was staring right at him. After a few seconds, Anne hugged Michael and she’s loved him ever since.”

“But, why should he be so nice to her?”

“Michael told me that when he was young, his parents brought him a genetically tame tigress.”

“Genetically tame?”

“According to Michael, some scientists started experimenting to see if wild animals were genetically predisposed to be dangerous to humans. Eventually, the gene was discovered. It was replaced with a corresponding gene from domesticated animals and genetically tamed wild animals were created. He thinks those experiments eventually led to Humanimals being created.”

“Why would humans do that?”

“Michael said that humans realized that their shortsightedness and lack of regard for the future of the environment led them to decide to save the wildlife of the planet through minor genetic modifications which allowed formerly dangerous animals to become docile enough to keep as pets.

“Michael had always been fascinated by tigers so his parents bought a genetically tamed Sumatran tigress for him. A couple of years later, they bought a red fox vixen for him. He said the

tigress and vixen slept with him every night until he left for college. He said while he was at college, Tiggy, the tigress, got sick. He came home and took her to their veterinarian. The veterinarian said that Tiggy had adenocarcinoma. Tiggy died two days later. Vixy, the vixen, had always slept with Tiggy. Michael let Vixy see Tiggy's body and Vixy started crying out and even climbed up onto Tiggy's body, curled up and fell asleep. Michael went to wake her later to feed her and found that she had died, too. He said he cried for a week afterward because he had lost his two best friends on the same day."

"Michael cried over the loss of two animals? I didn't know humans became that attached to their animals."

"They do, Ophelia. Humans aren't the cruel, cold-hearted creatures you've always believed them to be. Yeah. In the past, they tended to treat us wrong but, they always had a soft spot in their hearts for their pets."

At that moment, the front door to the Panthera home opened and in rushed Michael. He raced up to Tigresa, got on his knees, wrapped his arms around her ankles, and, in a fearful voice, said, "I'm here, Dr. Tigresa. Please don't have me for dinner." Then, he touched his forehead to the floor.

Glaring at Michael's prostrate body, Tigresa said, "Stand up."

When Michael continued laying there, Tigresa looked at Amanda and said, "Are you sure you want to marry this man?"

Amanda smiled and replied, "Sometimes, I wonder. But, he is cute when he tries to be apologetic."

Returning her attention to Michael, Tigresa said, "Get up, Michael, I promise you won't be the main course for dinner any time soon." When Michael didn't let go, she added, "Unless you refuse to let go of my legs and get up."

Anne toddled up and said, "Mama, y Mah'l lah' daht?"

"He's just being silly, sweetheart."

Anne poked Michael and said, "Mah'l, you bean silly?"

Michael rolled over, grabbed Anne, hugged her, and said, "Of course, I'm being silly, Sweetie. I'm always being silly."

Anne screeched happily when Michael grabbed her. Then, she said, "Silly Mah'l. Y you no come see Anne?"

"I'm sorry, Anne." He looked at Amanda and added, "I've been spending a lot of time with Amanda."

"Oh." She pushed herself off of Michael, walked over to Amanda and said, "Manna, u'." When Amanda picked her up, Anne said, "Y you no let Mah'l come see Anne?"

"I'm sorry, Anne. Michael and I have been planning our wedding, okay?"

Anne thought for a few seconds before saying, "Uh-kay."

Everyone retired to the dining room. Anne demanded to sit between Amanda and Michael, as usual. Marie Gato-Selvagem sat next to Richard, Victoria sat next to Adam Blaid, and the married couples sat next to each other. The young cubs, kits, and pups sat at their own table while they ate.

Tigresa looked at Michael and Amanda and said, "Speaking of planning your wedding; how far along have you gotten?"

With embarrassment in her voice, Amanda said, "We've decided on which ceremony we want."

Tigresa said, "And?"

"That's as far as we've gotten."

To everyone's shock, Ophelia said, "Amanda! Your wedding is less than three months away! Who's going to conduct the ceremony!? Where is it going to be held!? Who's going to be the groom's witness and the bride's witness!? Who's going to cater the reception!?" Ophelia paused and looked around the table at all of the shocked faces. "I'm sorry for my outburst but, when Jacob and I were getting married, when it was 3 months until the wedding day, all we had to do was purchase the tuxedo and my wedding dress."

Susan smiled and asked Amanda, "Which ceremony did you select, Amanda?"

"I decided on the Traditional Modern ceremony."

Everyone around the table laughed and looked at Michael who said, "What? Every one of you married men, I want to ask you, how much input did you have in deciding which ceremony was used?" Once again, everyone laughed.

Leo was the only male who responded. "My only input was saying my vows. I came home from fishing one day and found my mother and Tigresa sitting at the table talking. I heard my mother say, 'I quite agree with you, Tigresa. The Modern Traditional is beautiful. You made the right decision.'"

Michael looked at Mr. Blaid and said, "What about you, Mr. Blaid? How much input did you have?"

"Oh, no, Michael!" He said. "I'm not saying anything. I have to sleep with that woman and I want to continue to do so." Everyone laughed uproariously.

Ophelia finally spoke up. "Jacob had a lot of input in our wedding plans. In fact, Daddy told him to speak up and tell me and Mama what he wanted."

Tigresa said, "You had the traditional ceremony, didn't you, Ophelia?"

"Yes, it was something my father insisted on."

Jacob said, "Her father was involved in every aspect of our wedding ceremony."

In a shocked voice, Michael said, "Really!?"

Ophelia replied, "Yes, why?"

"No offense, Mrs. Fuchs, but, even among humans when I was growing up, the groom, the bride, and the bride's mother were the ones who did most of the planning and the groom didn't do much planning. The bride's father was just happy to be rid of a daughter." Michael laughed when he saw the look of surprised shock on Amanda's face.

After a few seconds, Michael added, "Sorry. I couldn't resist the opportunity for a little levity. Actually, the bride's father's input into the ceremony was paying for the wedding.

"Mrs. Fuchs, I don't know much about Humanimal wedding ceremonies, so, let me ask, what kind of relationship does your father and mother have?"

"They have a very loving relationship."

"Okay, let me rephrase the question. Was there a clear boss between them? In other words, did they discuss things or did one say how things were going to be and the other went along with that decision?"

"Daddy would tell Mama what he expected and Mama would make sure we did it. Why?"

"So, would you say your parents were traditionalists?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"I'll try to explain. Once upon a time in human society, the husband was the boss in the family. He worked and the wife stayed home and took care of the house and the children. What the husband said was law. This was because the prehistoric males were the hunters and the females were the gatherers. The males were the warriors and the females were the mothers and teachers. These were the traditional separations of duties. Over time, things slowly changed and the husbands and wives became partners. This change was abetted by a major war in which literally millions of males were conscripted into the various militaries all around the world. Without men to do what were traditionally male jobs, women were hired to do those jobs. After the war ended, the men returned and the women didn't want to give up their jobs and independence even though they were forced to do so. Eventually, this turned into a war, a different kind of war. It became a war of the sexes."

Ophelia's eyes widened so wide that Michael could see the whites of her eyes. Michael continued, "Not that kind of war, Mrs. Fuchs. It was a war fought in the bedroom you might say. The women were tired of being taken for granted and taken advantage of. Slowly, but steadily, men realized that the women were right and, by the time my parents got married, husbands and wives were

equal partners in about 99% of households. Of course, there were those anachronisms who were of the belief that the women should bow to a male's 'superiority' but, when these men had a hard time finding women who would accept them, they slowly died off through attrition."

Ophelia said, "What do you mean?"

"It got harder and harder to find women who agreed with them so, their ideas died with them."

"But, shouldn't the man be the boss?"

"I don't think so. It's kind of a partnership. Yes, there should be a titular boss who hands down decisions but, those decisions should be the result of discussions between the partners and don't hesitate to argue your point. For example, let's say you and Mr. Fuchs are deciding to replace your current automobile with a newer one. Now, let's suppose you prefer a Tanuki and he prefers a Hounda. Under the belief system of the male is always right, you would give up the automobile you prefer because Mr. Fuchs is the head of the family. Under the equal partnership that I believe in, Amanda and I would discuss the merits of each vehicle, the negatives of each and come to a mutually agreeable decision. After this discussion, argument if you will, we make our decision and go with it. Do you see what I'm saying, Mrs. Fuchs?"

After a few seconds, Ophelia said, "I believe so. But, what about your wedding plans?"

Michael smiled and said, "In that case, my response would be, 'Yes, Dear' or 'Whatever you say, Dear'."

"But, that doesn't sound like a discussion or an argument."

"No, ma'am, it doesn't. It's an acknowledgment of who's the boss in that situation. As I said, it's an equal partnership and that requires knowing who's the boss in any given situation." Everyone laughed except Ophelia; however, she did smile openly.

Tigresa said, "Michael, I'm sure you know that we're here to help you plan your wedding."

Michael said, "What!? You said you wanted us here because Anne missed me! Come on, Amanda, we're leaving!"

Tigresa practically growled, "Michael, sit down." Michael sat down, smiling the whole time. "One of these days, Michael, one of these days . . ."

"Pow! To the moon?"

"Maybe.

"Now, as I was saying, we've decided that we need to help you plan your wedding. I believe you said you've decided on the Traditional Modern Ceremony. Right?"

Amanda said, “Yes, ma’am. As much as I love Michael, I don’t want us to be tied together for an hour.” Michael smirked causing Amanda to glare at him. “What did I say, now, Michael?”

Michael just shook his head. Jacob said, “Michael, if you’re thinking what I think your thinking, you need to tell her.”

“Me!? You’re her father. Why don’t you tell her?”

“Because Humanimal canids don’t have the ability you’re thinking about.”

“You’re trying to make me embarrass myself, aren’t you?” Jacob just smiled at him. “Oh, very well.” Michael took a deep breath and said, “Amanda, feral canids have a part of their penises that, during sex, will enter the female and swell. This swelling will prevent the penis from leaving the female until the male has successfully impregnated the female. We humans called this situation, ‘tying the female’ and it usually lasted . . .” Michael coughed and continued with, “from 30 minutes to an hour.”

Amanda looked at all of the grinning faces, including Ophelia’s, and said, “I didn’t mean it like that! I know humans and Humanimals can’t do that! She paused for a couple of seconds before adding, “Can they?” When no one responded, she repeated, somewhat fearfully, “Can they?”

Michael rescued her by saying, “No, they can’t. Well, humans can’t but, I’m sure there are some Humanimal canid males with that heritage trait.”

Everyone turned to look at Edward who was, perhaps, the most feral of all of the Humanimals in the room, who said, “Don’t look at me! Even if I did have that heritage trait, I’d never admit it to all of you.”

Susan smiled an impish smile as she snuggled against Edward and said, “I call it mandatory cuddle time.”

Shocked, Edward said, “Susan!” Everyone laughed uproariously.

Richard said, “I’m glad I’m a felid and not a canid.”

Michael said, “Don’t think you’re getting off scot-free, Richard. Feral felids have barbs on theirs which cause the female pain when he withdraws. As I understand it, that pain causes the female to ovulate.”

Maria said, “So, that’s why you want to cuddle afterward.”

Richard said, “Maria, we’re in front of my parents!”

Leo said, “Don’t worry, boy. I’d have been more shocked if you were still a virgin.”

“Thanks, dad, I think. Aren’t we supposed to be planning a wedding not discussing the attributes of various sex organs?”

Amanda, who had been quiet during this discussion asked, “Michael, what quirks do humans have sexually?”

“I guess that would depend on your definition of quirks. We don’t have barbs, knots, or medial rings but, I’m sure we have some kind of physical quirk.”

Richard complained, “Augh! You too, Amanda?” She smiled impishly causing Richard to say, “I’m going to spend time with the young kids.” Everyone laughed but, as he stood, Maria placed her hand on his arm and smiled at him. He sat back down with a disgruntled grunt.

Michael said to him, “Richard, I never realized that you were so shy and reserved where sex is concerned.”

Maria smiled as she said, “Oh, he isn’t.” Once again, everyone laughed.

Richard said, “As Maria pointed out, I’m not. I just think it isn’t something that should be discussed in a public forum.”

Michael smiled as he turned his head and looked at Tigresa. “So, Dr. Tigresa,” he said. “We’re here to plan Amanda’s and my wedding. What do we need to discuss?”

“In a minute, Michael. There’s someone else that needs to be here.”

A few seconds later, the doorbell was rung and Leo answered it. He invited the person in and Michael saw a seven-foot-tall Kodiak brown bear walk into the living room. Michael was intimidated and intrigued at the same time because the bear was vaguely familiar looking.

The bear walked up to Tigresa, gave her a hug and said, “Good evening, Tigresa. How are you today?”

“I’m doing well, Padre Jasper. I believe you know everyone here except this young man.” She led him to Michael and said, “Padre, this is Michael Thomson. He’s our newest son.”

“Newest son? I know Humanimal genetics is an inexact science at best but, I’ve never known of a Humanimal giving birth to a full-grown child, let alone a human.” He laughed at his joke as did Michael.

Tigresa rolled her eyes and smiled. “Michael is the human Leo and I were taking care of for 20 years. After he awoke, we adopted him to give him a family.”

Smiling, Jasper said, “Well, Michael, it’s a pleasure to meet the oldest living thing on Earth.” He stuck out his hand and introduced himself, “Padre Jasper Orso, Michael.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Padre . . . Orso? Do you have a relative that works for the Reynard family?”

“Yes, I do. My brother works for them. Do you know him?”

“I met him a couple of times. He seems to be a really nice guy.”

“Oh, he is. He wouldn’t hurt a fly except to protect his friends and family. However, mosquitoes need to watch out.” Padre Jasper laughed again.

They were walking as they talked. When they entered the living room, Padre Jasper went around greeting everyone and speaking with each one for a moment. When he reached Ophelia, he gave her a gentle hug. “By the one true God, Ophelia, it looks like you’re about to bust. When is your kit due, tomorrow?”

“No, Padre Jasper. The doctor says 3 weeks, minimum.”

“You must be must be carrying twins.”

Ophelia smiled and said, “Triplets.”

Everyone sat down and Padre Jasper blessed the gathering and continued with, “I was called over here to assist in planning a wedding. I see several potential brides. So, who is the lucky girl? Victoria?”

“Not me, Padre. I don’t intend to get married until after I graduate from college.”

Padre Jasper looked at Maria and said, “I don’t recognize you.”

“I am Maria Gato-Selvagem. I am Richard’s girlfriend and we are not planning a wedding.”

Finally, he turned his attention to Amanda. She smiled shyly and said, “Yes, Padre. It’s me.”

Padre Jasper looked around and asked, “Where’s your fiance?”

Amanda wrapped her arms around Michael and said, “Right here, Padre. It’s Michael.”

Michael thought he noticed a look of disapproval in Padre Jasper’s eyes as he looked at them. “Amanda,” he said. “You’re planning on marrying a human? I don’t believe it.”

Upon hearing this, Michael felt anger starting to well up inside him. However, he was saved from saying anything he might later regret when Amanda, in a testy voice, said, “What’s wrong with me marrying a human?”

Padre Jasper realized he had worded his statement wrong and said, “I’m sorry, Amanda. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. I know how your mother feels about humans so, I’m a bit surprised she isn’t bothered by the fact that you’re marrying one.”

Ophelia said, “You’re right, Padre. I’m not fond of humans in general but, Michael has shown me that I may have to rethink my attitude toward them.”

“Very well, I’m glad to see that your attitude is changing, Ophelia. I’ve met a few humans and I’ve found them to be regretful for what humans used to do to us and our feral ancestors.”

It was quiet for a few seconds before Susan said, “We’re here to plan a wedding so, let’s plan a

wedding.”

For two hours, the ladies and the Padre discussed everything from the time of the wedding to Amanda’s wedding dress. Even though Michael was bored to tears, he dutifully sat beside Amanda and listened to everything that was said. Since it was her big day, he agreed with almost everything she said she wanted and, as shocking as it may sound, Ophelia was in their corner. There weren’t any outright arguments but, there was the occasional disagreement and, in those rare incidents, everyone would look at Michael. All he would do was ask Amanda what she wanted and agree with her.

After two hours of wrangling over the details of the wedding, it was decided to take a short break. Michael, who had dutifully sat beside Amanda the whole time, realized that he was thirsty and decided to pour himself a glass of tea. As he was pouring the tea, Edward walked into the kitchen and smiled mischievously at Michael.

“What is so funny, Mr. Blaid?”

“Are you having fun, Michael?”

“It isn’t too bad. Is it normal for the groom to sit in on the planning of the wedding?”

“Actually, it is. You should have been at the planning of my wedding with Susan. My father is a speciesist and he didn’t approve of me marrying a rabbit. Of course, he enjoyed the fact that I had to endure my mother, her mother, Susan, and several others planning on what clothing I just had to wear.”

“They haven’t gotten to that part for me yet.”

As they talked, Ophelia walked into the kitchen. When Michael saw her, he said, “Excuse me, Mr. Blaid. I’d like to speak with Mrs. Fuchs for a moment.”

Edward nodded and left. Ophelia had a fearful look in her eyes as she said, “Is there a problem?”

“No, ma’am. Let’s just say I have a healthy curiosity.”

“About what?”

“Amanda and I were talking just now and, well, we’re curious as to why you’re so quick to agree with me and Amanda.”

With sadness in her voice, Ophelia said, “Ever since Amanda’s birth fur was replaced with her permanent fur and I started being accused of cheating on Jacob, I’ve been overly critical of Amanda’s decisions including her choice of you. As you know, I didn’t like humans. I didn’t want to see the real you. But, you’ve shown me that I was wrong.”

“Mrs. Fuchs, you can disagree without being disagreeable.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ask questions like, ‘Are you sure you want to do it that way?’ That would make her think before making a final decision.”

“What about you, Michael? You go along with all of her decisions.”

“He probably goes along with her decisions for the same reason I went along with yours, my dear.” A familiar voice said.

“What do you mean, Jacob?”

“Despite your father’s attitude toward marriage, I wanted you to be happy on our wedding day, Michael wants Amanda to be happy on theirs.”

“That’s true, Mrs. Fuchs. You see, even though my presence at the wedding is mandatory, I’m just window dressing. Amanda has shown me the wedding dress she wants to wear. While I think it’s too expensive for a dress she’s only going to wear once, I want her to be happy so I’ll help her pay for it because it’s a beautiful dress and I believe it will look even more beautiful on her.”

Jacob said, “Michael, it’s the bride’s father who should pay for the dress so I’ll pay for it.”

“Sir, have you seen the dress? It costs around 7,500 Yenars.”

“Okay, how about I pay one-third, you pay one-third, and Amanda pay one-third. That’s only 2,500 Yenars each.”

Michael looked at Ophelia and asked, “Are you okay with that, Mrs. Fuchs? I don’t want to overburden you, especially since you’re going to be giving birth soon.”

“It’s fine, Michael. Despite my protestations, Jacob started putting money aside to pay for your wedding ever since Amanda announced that you and she were getting married. Besides, he’s got three other daughters who’ll be getting married one day and he insists on paying for their weddings as well.”

“If you’re certain, then, I guess we can accept your offer, Mr. Fuchs.”

Ophelia said, “It wouldn’t do you any good to do otherwise, Michael. Jacob can be ever so stubborn about things when he’s made up his mind.”

Michael smiled a bit and said, “I bet. I know someone else like that.”

The three of them left the kitchen and Jacob rejoined Leo and Edward. Edward said, “Did you tell him?”

“No.”

Leo said, “You know you have to. When are you going to tell him?”

“At the reception.”

Edward said, “Why are you waiting so long?”

“Amanda asked me to.”

Leo said, “Why does she want to wait?”

Edward said, “Yeah. Is she afraid he’ll get angry and accuse her of deceiving him?”

“To tell the truth, I think he already suspects. Too many people know the truth and have come close to spilling the beans, so to speak. Personally, I don’t think learning the truth will change how he feels about her.”

Leo said, “You’re probably right, Jacob. Ever since he woke up, he’s impressed me as being an honorable human. The truth may shock him at first but, I believe the fact that he fell in love with her without knowing the truth tells us that the truth won’t change how he feels.”

Edward said, “You’re right, Leo. He’s helped several people get a job with SoGa Industries and I don’t regret hiring a single one of them, especially that Lobo-Rojo guy. He’s proven that he deserves the managerial position of our automotive maintenance division. Did you know that it was Michael who suggested the food court we installed several months ago?”

Jacob said, “Really?”

“He said that when people don’t have to rush to make lunch purchases, they tend to be more relaxed after lunch and, as a result, more productive.”

Jacob said, “Hmm. Maybe another idea I had will work out, too.”

Leo said, “What idea is that?”

Meanwhile, with the ladies, Michael said, “I don’t know too much about Humanimal wedding traditions but, I noticed that at Michelle and Albert’s wedding, there wasn’t a flower girl or a . . . ring bearer.”

Susan said, “Flower girl? Ring bearer?”

Michael laughed and said, “I guess y’all don’t have them.

“A flower girl,” he said, “walks down the aisle of the chapel ahead of the bride and sprinkles

flower petals, specifically rose petals, on the floor for the bride to walk on. She's usually a young girl between two and five years old."

Ophelia said, "Why would she sprinkle flower petals?"

"Well, human tradition holds that a flower girl lead the bride to her wedding, leaving her path covered in rose petals as a symbol of happiness and to make her last walk as a maiden a wonderful and beautiful occasion. Normally, ring bearers are usually relatives or close friends of the couple getting married and typically are under the age of 10. Having a child carry the wedding rings down the aisle symbolizes innocence and a new future for the bride and groom. The ring bearer precedes the the flower girl and carries a cushion with the wedding rings on it. He carries the cushion and stands next to the Padre who retrieves them as necessary during the ceremony. I know that Humanimals don't wear wedding rings but, the wedding bracelets could be on the cushion instead."

Tigresa said, "Who would you choose to be the flower girl?"

Michael smiled and said, "Who indeed?" He looked into the living room and called, "Anne. Come here, Sweetie."

As is normal for a 2-year-old, Anne ran as fast as her little legs would carry her straight into Michael's arms. She hugged him and kissed his cheek. "Wah you wan, Mah'l?"

"How would you like to help with my wedding?"

Anne bounced gleefully in his lap as she said, "Uh-huh! Ah lahk daht!"

"Okay. What you will do is walk down the aisle in front of Amanda carrying a basket full of rose petals. You'll have to drop the petals on the floor as you walk to where I'll be standing. Would you like to do that?"

Anne got quiet for several seconds before she said, "Uh-uh."

"Why not?"

"Cause mama make me pi' up de flowerss."

"What if I promise that your mama wouldn't make you pick them up? Would you do it, then?"

"Uh-huh!"

"Okay. First, we have to make sure everyone would like to see you do that."

"Uh-kay!"

"Good. Now, go back and play."

Anne hugged and kissed Michael again, climbed out of his lap and rejoined the other younger cubs to play. Everyone could hear her saying, "Ah gone he' Mah'l wif hin weddun."

Everyone laughed about how happy she was. Ophelia said, "What about the ring bearer as you called it? Who would we have to do that?"

"Haven't you got a kit about Anne's age, Mrs. Fuchs?"

"Yes, there's Angela. She's three-years-old."

"Hmm. Normally, the ring bearer is a boy."

"My next oldest is Erich. He's six."

"If you trust him to carry a cushion with the wedding bracelets on it, he'd be perfect."

Ophelia called out, "Erich!"

"Ma'am!?"

"Please come here."

Running feet could be heard. A couple of seconds later, a young red fox kit appeared at Ophelia's side. Upon his arrival, he said, "You want me, Mama?"

"Yes, dear. Your sister is getting married soon. She wants you to help with the wedding."

A look of curiosity crossed his face before he said, "Sister? Which one?"

Ophelia was shocked when she said, "Amanda."

"Amanda? She's not my sister."

Amanda started to look sad before Michael jumped in and said, "Why do you say that, Erich?"

"She's a tiger; I'm a fox."

"She's a fox, too."

"Uh-uh! She has stripes."

"Come here, Erich."

He hesitated and Michael added, "I won't hurt you, Erich. Besides, your mother is sitting right there and she could stop me if I tried."

Erich shrugged his shoulders and said, "Okay."

Michael led him behind Amanda. Michael pointed at Amanda's ears and said, "Do you see Amanda's ears?" Erich nodded. "They look just like your ears, don't they?" Erich nodded. "Now, look at her arms. She's got gloves just like you." Michael pulled up the hem of Amanda's dress and said, "She's got stockings like you, too."

“But, I don’t have stripes. She does.”

“Really?” Michael traced a line on Erich’s arm and said, “That’s a stripe. Your mama and daddy have stripes, too.” The shocked look on Ophelia’s face was what Michael was hoping to see.

“Really?” Erich said, surprised.

“Sure. Here let me show you.” Michael led Erich to Ophelia, knelt down, and traced a very faint stripe on her arm. “See, a stripe.”

Ophelia and Erich looked at her arm. Erich said, “Mama, you have stripes like Amanda.”

Ophelia was still staring at her arm as she said, “So, I do.” She looked at Michael and said, “How long have you known and how did you notice?”

“I noticed on the day we met. I didn’t say anything because I thought you knew.” Then, as an afterthought, he added, “Of course, you didn’t give me a chance to say anything.”

Ophelia looked embarrassed as she said, “Yes. I suppose I didn’t give you a chance to say anything.”

Michael turned to Erich and said, “Well, Erich, do you want to help Amanda and me with our wedding?”

“No, she ain’t my sister.”

Ophelia said, “Erich, why do you say that?”

“You know why, Mama.”

“Erich, those things aren’t true. You daddy is the only man I’ve ever been with. Besides, even if they were true, Amanda is still your sister. I carried and gave birth to her, just as I did with you.”

“I still don’t want to do it.”

“All right, dear. Go back and play with the others.”

Ophelia turned to Michael and said, “What are we going to do about your ‘ring bearer’?”

Michael thought for a moment before saying, “I need to make a telephone call. I’ll be right back.”

Michael went to the telephone, dialed ten numbers, and spoke for a couple of minutes. When he returned, he was smiling as he said, “The ring bearer situation is solved.”

“Who?” Amanda asked.

“Felipe Lobo-Rojó.”

Tigresa looked at Michael in shock. “Felipe Lobo-Rojo?”

“Are you upset, Dr. Tigresa?”

“No. I just didn’t even remotely consider him. You do know how much Anne likes him.”

“Yes, ma’am. That’s why I asked Raul if he’d let Felipe do us this favor.”

“Well, he impresses me as being smart enough to do something like that.”

“Good. Now that we’ve got all that settled, what else is there to talk about?”

They talked for another two hours planning the most intimate detail of the wedding. Jacob was called into the dining room so he could tell Michael and Amanda that he had their honeymoon planned out and it was a trip to Flamingo to visit Dogtona Beach and Jaguarville. Edward, who had accompanied Jacob, told them that they had been approved for a full month off from work so they could properly enjoy newlywed life.

Finally, around 1600, all the plans were finalized. Padre Jeremy gave a prayer of protection over everyone who had to drive home. Everyone said their good-byes and left.