

Chapter 61

The Wedding

Part I

The Rehearsal

Michael left his office and practically knocked Amanda down as he walked out the door. He caught her just before she lost her balance and fell. “Sweetheart!” He said, in shock. “I wasn’t expecting you to be there! Are you all right?”

Amanda wrapped her arms around him and gave him a quick kiss. “Yes. I wanted to surprise you so we could walk to my car together.”

“Well Hun, I am going to pick you up in an hour or so to take you to the rehearsal.”

“I know but why should we change our routine just because we’ll be married in less than 24 hours?”

Michael thought for a few seconds before saying, “I can’t think of a single reason why we should.”

Amanda took Michael’s arm and they walked out of the SoGa Industries building. A couple of minutes later they arrived at Amanda’s car where they reacquainted themselves with each other for several minutes before Michael finally told her he had to get home so he could get ready to take her to the rehearsal.

Amanda said, “You know, Michael, I still have a hard time believing that in less than 24 hours, my dream for the last two years will finally come true.”

“Believe it or not, Princess, it’s been my dream for the last two years, also.”

“What!? But . . .” Amanda said, incredulous.

“Hear me out. On the morning we met, I was in my room getting dressed to come to SoGa Industries to interview for a job. I had just pulled my pants up and was tucking my shirt in when my newest sister, Victoria, flung the door to my room open without so much as a, ‘By your leave’. I guess

she was hoping to catch in a state of undress. If that was the case, she was sorely disappointed because I had my back to the door and was just zipping up my pants when she walked in and she had a look of disappointment on her face.”

“She’s always been that way, Michael. She’s a notorious flirt and once she reached puberty, her flirtatiousness increased 10-fold. She had as many as three boyfriends at the same time. Plus, she’s always had a thing for humans.”

“Three!? That’s a good way to get a bad reputation.”

“Michael, remember that human morals aren’t Humanimal morals. The most likely way to get a bad reputation is to be born to a mixed race couple, like Victoria or Penny Wydra, or look like you were, like me.” Amanda looked a little sad as she said this but, when Michael reached to give her a hug, she said, “It’s all right, Michael, you’ve helped me by treating me the way you do.

“Anyway, I’m pretty sure Victoria and Penny were sexually experienced before they were 15 and I know for a fact that Victoria hasn’t been a virgin for the last three plus years. God! She told me about her experiences enough. I chose to remain a virgin because I wanted to wait for that special person.”

“And you settled for me.”

Amanda glared at him for a couple of seconds before she said, “I’m not settling for you, Michael, and if you say that again, I will bite you. Now, go on with your story.”

“Where was I? Oh, yeah. Victoria was hoping to catch me with my pants down, literally. We got to talking about relationships and I told her that I didn’t believe I could have a relationship with a Humanimal woman because, at the time, I saw you as animals that walked, talked and acted like humans. She asked me what kind of Humanimal would catch my eye.” Michael smiled enigmatically before he continued, saying, “I told her the woman would have to ‘knock me off my feet’. I meant it figuratively. Little did I know that in a couple of hours I would be literally knocked off my feet by a tiger-striped missile named Amanda Fuchs.” Michael’s smile broadened and he added, “I fell in love with you right then and there.”

Amanda slipped her arms around Michael’s waist and said, “And yet, you fought those feelings.”

“Remember, my dear, I was still relatively new to this world so I had to overcome my upbringing before I could accept my feelings for you. Now, you go get ready and I’ll be by to pick you up shortly.”

They kissed one more time; each got into his own car and drove home.

After taking a quick shower, feeding his cats, and getting dressed, Michael left his apartment and walked (danced would be a better description) down the stairs to the first floor. As he reached the bottom of the stairs, the door to the apartment directly below his opened and the occupant, a proboscis monkey of about 35 years of age by the name of Mahathir Monyet, backed out the door. Even though Michael wasn't one to intrude on the private times of others, nonetheless, he stood there watching for a moment because he noticed a pair of arms around Mr. Monyet's neck and he heard the distinctive sound of a very passionate kiss. As he watched, Michael noticed a pair of long ears above Mr. Monyet's head.

Smiling, Michael turned to leave the building when he heard Mr. Monyet calling his name. "Michael?"

"Oh, hello, Mr. Monyet. How are you doing today?"

"I'm fine, Michael. How are you this fine evening?"

"Equally fine, sir. You know, Mr. Monyet, I don't recall ever seeing your wife. I know she isn't a proboscis monkey. Do you mind if I ask what race she is?"

"She's a Patagonian mara. Her family was scandalized when she announced to them that she was not only marrying a monkey but a monkey from Borneo. Since she's from Catlanna, she doesn't leave our apartment very often. She doesn't want to cause a scene if she happened to meet one of her family members.

"Where are you heading, Michael?"

"I'm on my way to pick up my fiancée to go to our rehearsal."

"Oh? Oh, that's right! You're getting married tomorrow. Are you excited?"

"I'm on pins and needles, Mr. Monyet. How long have you been married?"

"16½ glorious years. Why do you ask?"

"I couldn't help but notice you two as you were leaving."

Mr. Monyet smiled and said, "When you have a nose like mine and you find someone who

thinks it's beautiful, you do whatever you can to keep that person happy."

"Well, if I recall correctly, the mara looks kind of like a slim, long-legged capybara so their muzzle is kind of thick and wide."

They had reached their cars by this time and Michael said, "You and the Mrs. are going to be at my wedding, aren't you?"

"We wouldn't miss it for the world."

Michael arrived at Amanda's apartment building and saw her waiting somewhat impatiently outside. When he stopped, she got into his car and said, "You're late."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. You said you'd be here by 1800 and it's 1803."

Michael looked at her for a couple of seconds before he smiled and said, "I'm sorry. If I give you a kiss will you forgive me for being so late?"

They kissed and held it for several seconds before pulling apart. Michael said, "Am I forgiven?"

Amanda looked dreamily into his eyes and said, "Yes. I'll forgive you this time. But, do make a habit of it." Michael laughed as he cranked his car and drove to the chapel.

They arrived at the chapel at 1820 and when they entered a 4½-year-old Mexican red wolf pup followed very closely by a 3½-year-old lion-tiger cub raced by them. Both of them were laughing uproariously when Anne looked at them and squealed happily.

"Mah'l!" This brought Hernando to a screeching halt. He turned and ran back to where Michael was crouching with his arms wide open. Anne ran to one arm and Hernando the other. Michael stood and gratefully accepted each cub's hug.

Anne said, “Mah'l, y you he'yuh?”

“Amanda and I are going to practice getting married.”

Hernando said, “Pwactice? Y you gone pwactice?”

“So we don't make any mistakes tomorrow. That's why you two are here.”

Anne looked at Michael with a huff and said, “I know how to fro flahwuhs on thuh flo-wuh.”

“I don't doubt that, sweetie. But you want to make sure you don't run out of flower petals before you reach the altar.”

“Oh.”

“Wha bou' me?” Hernando asked.

“You want to be sure you hold the cushion level so the marriage bracelets don't fall off.”

“Oh, okay.”

A familiar voice could be heard calling, “Anne! Where are you and Hernando, Anne?”

Tigresa walked through the doorway as she was speaking, “Michael and Amanda . . .” She saw them and said, “Oh! You're finally here. Come on! Padre Orso is ready to start the rehearsal.”

Amanda turned to Michael, slapped his arm, and said, “I told you we didn't have time to fool around! But, no! You had to get in some practice before the wedding!”

Tigresa stared at Amanda with her mouth open for several seconds before she turned to Michael and said, “Is she serious?”

Michael just smiled enigmatically before he put Anne and Hernando down. He offered his arm to Amanda who took it and, together they walked into the sanctuary. When they passed the still dumbfounded Tigresa, Michael whispered into Amanda's ear, “I think you broke her.” Amanda just smiled as they continued to where everyone was sitting.

When they reached the altar, Padre Orso was grinning from from ear to ear. Michael was a little nervous as he and Amanda approached Padre Orso who said upon their reaching him, “The chapel has wonderful acoustics, Amanda.” Then, he turned to everyone else without another word leaving Amanda completely embarrassed.

Padre Orso said, "All right, everyone, now we can start the wedding rehearsal." He turned to Michael and said, "Michael, who's your witness?"

"My witness is Reginald Reynard, III, Padre."

There was a stunned silence for several seconds as everyone, including Amanda, stared at Michael. Finally, Reginald stood and walked to Michael's side. Michael smiled and whispered, "Did you think I had invited you here out of the goodness of my heart?"

"No, I thought it was because Hernando is your, what do you call it, ring bearer? To tell the truth, I thought you would use Dr. Panthera or Richard."

"Amanda used to harass Richard when they were younger and he's got a mental block where she's concerned. Dr. Leo would have been my second choice but, he wanted to enjoy watching me get hooked. You, therefore, are the next choice because I know you would never do anything with Amanda since you love Rosa so much."

"That makes sense. I also appreciate the honor of being your witness and the fact that you have forgiven me for what I almost did to you and Amanda."

Michael smiled and said, "Don't worry, Reginald, forgiveness comes easily to me, especially when the person I'm forgiving deserves it."

Reginald laughed quietly as Padre Orso spoke to Amanda. "Amanda, do you have your witness?"

"Yes, Padre. My witness is . . ." She looked at her mother, who shook her head, and continued with, "Victoria Panthera."

Victoria squealed happily and rushed up to stand next to Amanda. Everyone at the altar laughed, Tigresa hung her head as she smiled and Leo shook his head as he laughed.

Padre Orso looked at Victoria and said, "I assume you were hoping she'd announce you as her witness."

"Oh, yes sir. She's been my friend since we were six."

"Very well. We have our witnesses and Michael wishes to introduce a couple of human traditions so, are the flower girl and ring bearer here?" Anne, along with Tigresa, and Hernando, along with Rosa, approached the altar and stood between Michael and Amanda. He continued, "All right, everyone except Michael and Reginald please go through the doors into the vestibule and we'll start the rehearsal."

Everyone left the altar, except Michael, Reginald, and Padre Orso. After the doors were closed, the Padre nodded to the organist who started playing a processional song and the doors to the vestibule opened. Hernando, accompanied by Rosa, entered carrying a plain pillow with two metal bands on it. It struck Michael that, despite his being a little over 3 years old, Hernando was carrying the pillow as reverently as any adult would have done. After Hernando and Rosa entered the nave, the doors closed.

When Hernando and Rosa were about halfway down the aisle, the doors opened a second time and Anne, accompanied by Tigresa, entered the nave. Anne was carrying a basket and looking into it. In a voice loud enough to be heard all through the chapel, Anne said, "Mama, ah gots no flah-wuhs in my basket."

Tigresa whispered, loud enough for everyone to hear, "That's all right, Sweetie. You'll have the flowers tomorrow. Just pretend to drop the flowers because they don't want to clean the floor twice."

"Uh-kay."

The doors closed and as she walked down the aisle, Anne pretended to drop flower petals. When Anne and Tigresa reached the base of the altar, the music stopped.

Five seconds after the music stopped, the organist started playing the Humanimal Wedding March. After about five bars, the doors opened a third time and Amanda, accompanied by Jacob, entered and started walking slowly toward the altar. This was one of the most important traditions of the ceremony. It was also the only tradition common to all of the Humanimal wedding ceremonies. Amanda had to reach the base of the altar at the exact moment the last note of the wedding march was played. Despite her best efforts, Amanda reached the altar one note after the music ended.

Padre Orso noticed Amanda's disappointment and said, "Very good, everyone, let's try it again."

This time, Amanda reached the altar one note too early. Amanda rehearsed her walk seven times before she got the pace right. When she got the pace right, Amanda requested rehearsing her walk several more times to make sure she had it right. Even though the cubs were starting to get a bit antsy, everyone agreed to Amanda's request. When she reached the altar in the proper amount of time once again, she smiled and said that she was satisfied that everything would work during the wedding.

After rehearsing Amanda's walk, the Padre explained what would be done during the ceremony. "The Traditional Modern Ceremony," he said, "includes the questioning of the couple to verify that they are coming to the marriage willingly but eliminates the challenge."

Michael gave a semi-sarcastic, "Aw!"

Amanda cut her eyes toward him and, even though she knew she shouldn't, asked, "Why do you want the challenge?"

"I want to tell all of our friends and family why I love you so much."

Are you sure that's the only reason?"

"Well, I also want to grab you in a bear hug, no offense Padre, and growl at everyone and say, 'She's mine and y'all can't have her!'"

Amanda glared at him and Padre Orso laughed uproariously. Amanda said, "Don't encourage him, Padre."

Padre Orso wiped a tear from his eye and said, "No offense taken at the bear hug comment, Michael. In fact, I give my wife a bear hug occasionally just to show her how much she means to me."

"So, are you serious about the challenge, Michael?"

"To be honest, Padre, tomorrow is Amanda's big day. It isn't likely she'll ever have another day like tomorrow for the rest of her life. If she doesn't want the challenge, there won't be a challenge."

Padre Orso looked at Amanda and said, "Amanda?"

She stared at Michael for several seconds before saying, "As interesting as it would be to have Michael do that, I think we'll keep the challenge out of the ceremony."

"Very well."

Padre Orso turned to everyone and said, "All right, everyone. We'll run through the rehearsal one last time and then, we'll all head over to the Panthera home to enjoy the rehearsal dinner."

Michael and Amanda arrived at the Panthera home and were immediately accosted by a three-year-old lion-tiger cub. "Ah you ma-eed nah?"

Amanda looked at Michael and said, "Not yet, Anne, but we will be tomorrow."

“Oh. Mah’l luh Manna?”

“Yes, Sweetheart, I most definitely do love her.”

Anne looked at Hernando and said, “Ah luh Nano. Ah gone ma-ee hin.”

Michael smiled and said, “Does he know this?”

“No-oo.”

“Maybe you should tell him so he doesn’t look for someone else.”

A look of shocked fear crossed Anne’s face as she climbed from Michael’s lap and ran looking for Hernando. Michael was smiling as Amanda glared at him. “What!?” He said when he saw the glare.

“That was a mean trick to play on Anne.”

“Who says it was a trick?”

“What do you mean?”

“Most of the people I know have been in love with each other most of their lives. You father told me that he has loved your mother since he was 10 and she was 6.”

Michael stopped talking and was staring at something that Amanda couldn’t see. This caused her to walk to where she could see what Michael was staring at. What she saw caused her to smile, too. They were looking at Anne and Hernando who were wrapped in a hug and Anne was whispering in Hernando’s ear.

“What do you think she’s saying to him?”

“Knowing Anne, she’s probably telling him that he better not find another girlfriend because she’s going to marry him.”

Amanda kissed his cheek and said, “Well, Lover boy, I’m going to get something to drink and talk with the ladies.”

“All right, Sweetie.”

Michael looked around and saw Padre Orso sitting and talking with a 6-foot-tall polar bear woman. He had a question he wanted to ask Padre Orso so he walked over and said, "Hello Padre."

"Oh, Michael! I'd like you to meet my wife, Juanita."

Shocked, Michael said, "Juanita!?"

Mrs. Orso said, "Yes. Is there a problem with my name?"

"Oh! No! Please don't misunderstand. Juanita is a Springnish name and you're a polar bear."

"I see. Yes. When my last feral ancestor 'donated' his or her DNA, that ancestor was living in a zoo in Ibearia. After my first Humanimal ancestor was created, they decided to stay in Ibearia and that's how I came to have my name."

"You don't have an accent. Your family must have lived here a long time."

"I believe my parents said our family moved here about 1,000 years ago."

"I see. And your family chose to continue giving their cubs names from their homeland."

"Yes, they did. Jasper and I decided to name our cubs names that we like."

"Now, dear," Padre Orso said, "Tell him what I said about naming our cubs."

Juanita laughed and said, "He said that I could name our cubs anything I wanted to name them as long as the names were easy to pronounce and easy to spell. All he was concerned with was making them."

Michael laughed and said, "You didn't."

"Yes, I did."

"It's a wonder she didn't beat you."

"She did. Of course, after they were born, I would come home from work and if she looked bedraggled, I would take her by her shoulders, guide her to her favorite chair, kiss the top of her head, and go take care of our cubs. Bathing, dressing, and feeding them was no problem. Changing diapers was something else entirely."

Juanita said, “He didn’t mind the wet ones. The other ones were an entirely different matter. But, I will say, he changed them, too.”

Michael said, “Most men have very sensitive noses for those things.”

Padre Orso said, “I will say this; when I helped with the cubs, she was more than happy to show her appreciation.” He gave Michael a knowing wink which caused Juanita to scowl at him. “Just a bit of advice to consider in a few years.”

“Thank you, Padre. I’ll do just that.”

Juanita said, “I think I’ll join the other ladies.” She looked pointedly at Jasper and added, “Don’t say something that you may regret later.”

After she walked off, Michael said, “You two have a wonderful marriage.”

“Yes. She reached the altar just as the wedding march ended.”

“Oh! That begs a question. When and how did that tradition start?”

“It’s a very old tradition. I believe it began around 1,500 years ago. As I understand it, a white Norwegian rat woman fell in love with a Norwegian forest cat man. She was nervous partially because of the ancestral problems of cats being predators of rats and partially because of his status in their community.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s family was well off. They owned a lot of land and a couple of businesses. Her family was upper middle class. They didn’t own businesses or anything like that but they didn’t want for much.”

“I see. She wasn’t quite in his social status.”

“Exactly. Plus, there was the minor problem of their races. While interracial relationships weren’t illegal, they were frowned upon, especially between so-called predator and prey races. All that didn’t matter to them. They started dating and after a couple of years, they decided to get married. That opened a whole new can of worms.”

“Why?”

“His friends and family claimed she was a gold digger and was only after his family’s money.

“Being a human, I know what you envision when you think of a rat, sort of a triangular shape from nose to hips. Right?”

“Well . . .”

Padre Orso laughed softly and said, “That isn’t true of Humanimal rats and mice. She was five feet tall and had a nice, pleasing shape, long blonde hair and enticing blue eyes. In short, she was a very attractive woman. Her friends said he was only interested in her body.”

“If I may say without sounding cruel, did she have a reputation as a girl who would give it away?”

“Actually, no. Back then, most people who got involved in an interracial relationship didn’t intend to spend the rest of their lives together.” Michael laughed. “Don’t laugh. Back when Humanimals were held as slaves it wasn’t uncommon to mate a bear with a lion to produce strong cubs to do the work they were required to do. The couple was only allowed to be together until the female conceived and the stud was given another female with the attributes that was desired to be bred by the male. This new female could be any race, bear, lion, tiger, wolf, etc.”

“Damn, I heard similar stories about when humans would enslave each other.”

“Even today, there are groups who are opposed to interracial relationships because of those things. Even when my wife and I were dating, we had to listen to the whispered innuendos.”

“But, you’re both bears.”

“True, but, I’m a European brown bear and she’s a Polar bear. For some speciesists, that’s enough of a difference.”

“Wow!”

“Yes. Anyway, on her wedding day, the rat woman walked down the aisle and reached the altar just as the last note of the Wedding March was played. Nobody thought anything of it at the time.

“When the Padre reached the challenge, doors on both sides of the sanctuary flew open. Her family came through one door and his came through the other. Both families were armed for battle.

“Her father said, ‘Padre, this ceremony ends now! I will not allow this cat to take advantage of my little girl!’”

“The cat’s father said, ‘Hmph! It’s your daughter that’s taking advantage of my son! She’s only interested in our money!’

“She stepped in front of the cat and, glaring at her father, said, ‘Father! I do not care what you think. He and I decided to get married. He is not taking advantage of me.’

“Then, the cat stepped in front of the rat and, glaring equally hard at his father, said, ‘I love this woman and I’m going to marry her. And don’t worry. She won’t get a penny of your money because, I have decided to estrange myself from our family. I have filed the necessary legal paperwork with the local courts. In other words father, I am no longer your son. She and I will start a new lineage without your assistance.’

“The rat looked at her family and said the same thing. When the families heard their children say these things, they tried to talk them out of making what they considered rash decisions but the couple just turned their backs on their families and continued with the ceremony.”

“Wow! Did the couple change their minds?”

“No. They got married and lived happily as husband and wife for 65 years. When their daughters got married, the mother told them the story of how she reached the altar just as the last note of the Wedding March was played and how happy she had been during her marriage. The daughters followed her suggestion and also had happy marriages. They told their daughters and so on. Finally, after a few generations, the tradition was established and now all women try to complete their walk down the aisle to coincide with the ending of the Wedding March.”

Michael laughed softly and said, “Padre, you said that the couple were in love enough to be willing to sacrifice their lives for each other to go through with the wedding. That tells me that they worked hard at their marriage to the point that they did whatever they could to ensure the happiness of their partner. It wasn’t the timing of the walk down the aisle, it was the work they put into the marriage that made it work so well.”

“Maybe so, Michael, but, are you going to tell Amanda that?”

Michael glanced over to where Amanda was talking to all the ladies, smiled sheepishly, and said, “No, sir. No sense in tempting fate.”

“Oh, I know that Amanda has decided against the binding ceremony; what about the ‘kidnapping’?”

“We’ve decided against that as well. I’ll be taking her home later and, she’ll take a taxi to the chapel tomorrow. I’ll drive there so I can drive us to our honeymoon.”

Padre Orso smiled and said, “Well, in that case, Michael, I’ll see you tomorrow at the chapel. Remember, you should arrive there at least 2 hours before the ceremony so you can be fully prepared.”

“I will, Padre. Thanks for the story.”

“You’re welcome, Michael.”

Padre Orso looked at his wife and said, “Juanita, sweetheart. I think it’s time we went home.”