

Chapter 20 The Banquet

Moana

The day of the Morgan family dinner banquet finally came. Selina informed me that anyone attending these banquets was expected to dress formally, so I found a nice, dark blue dress with bows in Ella's closet and dressed her up with cute socks and shoes, then curled her hair and put a big bow in it. She seemed to have completely forgotten Kelly's rude comments at the luncheon the week before, and if she didn't forget, she at least didn't seem to let it bother her.

"Wow! My hair's so curly!" Ella said, bobbing her head to make her curls bounce. "Thank you, Moana!"

I smiled at the little girl in the mirror and squeezed her shoulders. All of a sudden, her gaze slipped over to my outfit, and her smile faded.

"Are you going to dress up?" she asked.

I looked down at my own outfit with a slight frown. I had chosen the nicest clothes I owned that were also appropriate for a nanny at a family gathering: a simple dress, low heeled shoes, and no jewelry so as not to stand out too much. I thought I looked perfectly fine for my status, but now that Ella pointed it out, I felt incredibly plain.

"Oh... I'm just wearing this," I said with a shrug.

"Nonsense."

I looked up to see Selina standing in the doorway. Her lips were pressed into a thin line as she looked at me, shaking her head with her arms folded across her chest.

“Is this inappropriate?” I asked Selina, stepping away from Ella to show my full outfit.

Selina sighed. “It’s fine, but you can wear something a little nicer. You’re a pretty girl, but it makes you look homely.”

I blushed at the housekeeper’s sudden kind words. She had never mentioned my appearance before, save for the night of the interview. She seemed a bit shocked, herself, when she finished speaking, and both of our faces turned a slight tinge of red.

“Come,” she said, quickly turning on her heel. “We’ll take care of this. Hurry up! You haven’t got all day.”

With that, Selina disappeared down the hall. I jogged after her, ignoring Ella’s giggles.

“Now, let’s see...”

I looked around confusedly, not knowing where Selina went although I could hear her muttering to herself and the sounds of her digging through something. “Hmm... Too big... Too showy... Aha!”

Selina suddenly emerged from a large closet in the hallway holding a long dress. It was a dark emerald green color and had short flutter sleeves.

“Here,” she said, holding it out to me. “The green will complement your complexion and your hair.”

I took the dress. It felt like a light cotton material, perfect for the summer heat, but appeared luxurious.

“Thank you,” I said, holding the dress up to myself and turning to look in the hallway mirror. “Does this belong to one of the maids?”

“It was mine when I was your age, actually,” Selina said, taking me by surprise. When I looked at her, I noticed that her aging cheeks were a bit red and she quickly averted her gaze. “I haven’t worn it in years. You can keep it.”

Once again, I was taken aback by the grumpy old housekeeper’s kindness. For a moment, I imagined her as a young woman wearing this dress, and pictured her as being a beautiful young girl.

I put on the dress in my room. It fit like a glove, and Selina was right — it suited my coloring perfectly, and brought out the green in my eyes. Although it was a dress that was appropriate for a nanny, it was still a bit sexy and showed off my curves, and I was surprised that Selina would pick it for me.

Next, Amy and Lily came into my room. They curled my hair and then pulled it back into a half-bun before giving me minimal makeup, with dark red lipstick that made me feel attractive. Once they were finished, I felt like an entirely new person.

Edrick was waiting in the lobby downstairs, so Ella and I quickly took the elevator down once I was ready. As the elevator doors opened and I emerged with Ella’s hand in mine, Edrick’s eyes became transfixed on me for a fleeting moment. I felt my heart pulse suddenly as he looked at me, and for a brief moment, I felt Mina’s presence inside of me, as though the way he looked at me made my wolf stir. Just as quickly as it began, however, it was over. Edrick looked away, returning to his usual aloof self, and got into the car.

The house where the party was held was a palace. It had hundreds of rooms, countless staff, and dozens of garden courtyards with fountains and marble sculptures. As we entered the foyer, I couldn’t help but feel out of place in such an expensive mansion, and wondered to myself how huge the Morgan family must have been for them to need such a massive home.

Indeed, the Morgan family was enormous. Ella was immediately accosted by older aunts and uncles and cousins who all doted on her, and who also barely paid me any attention — not that I minded — before we were even able to take our seats at the banquet table.

“Come here, Ella.”

A male voice boomed above the rest. I looked up to see an older man standing beside Verona; judging from the steely gray eyes and his tall, thin build, he was Edrick’s father. Ella, somewhat nervously, walked up to the old man.

“Hello, Grandpa.”

On Verona’s other side, just as I had worried, stood Kelly — and the way that her eyes widened when she saw me told me all that I needed to know.

The banquet soon began, and I found myself seated between Ella and Kelly. Across from me sat Edrick and Verona, with Edrick’s father — I discovered his name was Michael — sitting at the closest end of the long banquet table. The luxurious meal was served, consisting of roast duck and countless other dishes.

“I don’t like duck,” Ella whispered into my ear, making a face at her plate.

“It’s alright,” I responded with a gentle smile. “You can eat something else.”

“So, tell me,” Kelly suddenly chimed in, grabbing my attention as she swirled her wine around in her glass, “is such a dress suitable for a nanny?”

I was taken aback by the curt question and didn’t know how to respond; Verona, however, heard Kelly’s comment.

“You look beautiful, darling,” Verona said with a wink. “I’m so glad you were able to come. Aren’t you, dear?” she said, turning to her husband.

Michael slowly chewed his duck, eyeing me up and down for several painfully long moments before swallowing. “Hmph,” he said, before promptly turning toward Edrick. “Edrick, have you found a mate yet?”

Edrick stared down at his plate. “No, father.”

“Well, the clock is ticking,” the old man said, stabbing another piece of duck with his fork and waving it around a bit as he spoke. “It’ll only be so long before the public finds out about your illegitimate child. People will ask questions, and it won’t look good for the WereCorp image.”

Michael’s backhanded comment caused the table to fall into silence. Beside me, Ella abruptly stood and pushed her chair back. I looked down at her to see tears rolling down her little cheeks, and before I could stop her, she stormed out.

I tentatively slid my chair out; Verona, from across the table, cast me a subtle but approving nod, and I took that as my green light to follow Ella.

As I searched for Ella, it occurred to me that Edrick’s cold and aloof demeanor must have come from his father. It was strange to me that Verona, who was such a sweet and warm woman, would have been married to such a brute for so many years.

I eventually found Ella in the garden. She was sitting on a stone bench, swinging her legs with her hands folded in her lap as she looked down at the ground.

“Can I sit with you?” I asked, to which she nodded.

I sat and put my arm around Ella’s shoulders.

“Grownups are mean,” she said finally after a few minutes.

“They sure can be,” I replied gently. “But when you grow up, you’ll be nicer than they are, and that’s all that matters.”

“Ahem. Moana?” a familiar voice said suddenly.

Ella and I looked up.

“Uncle Ethan!” Ella said, jumping up and running to the man standing in front of us.

Ethan Bradley, the famous artist and the kind man who I met at the orphanage... was secretly a part of the Morgan family?