

Chapter 34 The Exhibit

Moana

I couldn't bring myself to avoid Ethan's exhibit after he had asked me to go so many times. So, after putting Ella to bed, I went to Selina with my hand on my stomach and a frown on my face.

"I'm afraid I might have contracted food poisoning," I said, feigning illness. "Can you keep an eye on things if Ella wakes up? I'm going to go to urgent care."

Selina frowned, looking at her watch. "Do you need a driver?" she asked.

I vehemently shook my head. "No. It's okay. I'll call a cab."

"Well... Alright," she said, pursing her lips. "Be careful."

After that, I put on a simple dress that could pass for urgent care attire if anyone were to question me, and flagged down a cab outside of the penthouse.

Just as I suspected, the art gallery was packed to the brim when I arrived. As I got out of the cab, I felt a lump rise in my throat; all of the other patrons seemed to be dressed lavishly, which made me feel incredibly out of place.

There was a line with a bouncer to get in. I stood in line, patiently waiting my turn.

“Name?” the bouncer said, eyeing me up and down suspiciously as I walked up to him.

“Moana Fowler,” I replied.

The bouncer narrowed his eyes at me before scanning his list for a painstakingly long moment. “You’re not on the list,” he said. His voice was gruff and indifferent, and before I could say anything else, he waved me away to let the next person in.

“But I have an invitation from Ethan,” I replied, clutching my purse nervously as I stood to the side.

The bouncer, not even bothering to look at me, simply scoffed. “I highly doubt the artist personally invited a human. Quit wasting my time and get out of here. You can come back to view the art tomorrow, when it’s open to the public.”

“Actually,” a familiar voice said from behind the bouncer, “I did invite her. Come on in, Moana.”

Ethan stepped out from behind the bouncer, resulting in a chorus of murmurs making their way through the line of people waiting. The bouncer’s eyes widened, and without another word, he stepped out of the way and let me in.

“So sorry about that,” Ethan said, guiding me in through the foyer with his hand on my back. “He’s just doing his job. These art openings are very exclusive.”

“I understand,” I replied meekly as I looked around at all of the wealthy-looking people that were milling about the museum.

“Well, thank you for coming,” Ethan said with a warm smile. “Unfortunately I have to participate in some involuntary networking with a few of the patrons here, but feel free to take a look around. And have a glass of champagne, too.” He reached out, taking a glass of champagne off of a waiter’s tray, and handed it to me. “I’ll find you soon.”

I took the champagne and nodded, watching as Ethan disappeared into the crowd.

Taking a deep breath and a sip of the champagne for courage, I made my way into the gallery so I could get a better look at the artwork.

If I thought that Ethan's work was amazing before in his studio, it was even more amazing now beneath the gallery lighting. A jazz quartet played lively music from a small stage at the back of the gallery, creating an atmosphere that almost made the artwork come alive. Groups of patrons milled about, many of them using sophisticated 'art speak' to describe the works when, in actuality, they were only trying to impress their peers... But I was completely enthralled with the work.

I slowly walked around, not speaking to anyone — not that anyone would have spoken to me, either — with my glass of champagne in my hand as I closely studied each and every piece of artwork. Each piece seemed to fit into a similar theme, which felt reminiscent of the childhood drawings that Ethan had showed me the night before.

There was one particular painting that caught my eye, however. It was small, tucked away in a corner of the gallery, and no one else seemed to notice it; but I did. I felt entranced by the depiction of a young boy, staring out at the viewer from a black void. His face was sad, but there was also a hint of something else behind it that I couldn't quite read. It was as if he was secretly mocking his own sadness.

"Fan of that one, huh?" Ethan's voice suddenly said from behind me, breaking me out of my trance. I jumped a bit at the sound of his voice, not realizing that I had been standing in front of the painting for quite some time.

"Oh... You startled me," I said, feeling my face flush. "Yes. I think this one might be my favorite."

"It's my favorite, too," Ethan replied. "I haven't given it a name."

I nodded, turning back to look at the painting. There was a bit of a silence before Ethan spoke. “Did you remember to bring some of your work to show me?”

“I did, actually,” I replied, my hands shaking a bit nervously as I reached into my purse and pulled out a single, folded piece of paper and held it out to Ethan. “It’s not much. Just a sketch.”

Ethan took the paper from me and opened it. I watched with anticipation, feeling my heart rate quicken as he carefully studied my drawing. It was the same drawing that I had been working on in my bedroom the night that Edrick told me about the WereCorp wages: a drawing of the cityscape from the view of my balcony at the penthouse.

“Moana,” he finally said after a few moments, “this is stunning. You didn’t mention that you could draw this well.”

I felt my face go red at the famous artist’s words. “R-Really?” I stammered.

Ethan nodded vigorously and handed the drawing back to me. “You’ve got some real talent. You should try to tap into it a bit more; I could see you doing really well with your art.”

I took the paper back and folded it again, putting it in my purse. “That means a lot,” I murmured. “Thank you. By the way... is this painting for sale?”

Ethan’s eyes widened. “You don’t have to buy it. You can have it.”

“No, please,” I insisted. “I don’t want to take it without paying. It’s too beautiful.”

“Nonsense,” Ethan interrupted. I watched with wide eyes as he waved over a member of the staff. He mumbled something to the staff member, who nodded his head and took the painting off the wall right before our eyes and walked away, disappearing into a back room. “He’s going to wrap it up for you. I won’t let you leave tonight empty-handed.”

“T-Thank you,” I replied, biting my lip. Suddenly, I had an idea, and pulled the drawing back out of my purse. “Let’s trade, then. I know it’s a bit uneven, but...”

Ethan grinned and took the paper, slipping it into his pocket. “I think it’s a very fair trade.”

We both fell silent again. Even now that the painting was no longer in front of us, it wouldn’t leave my mind, and it made me wonder about our childhoods and what it meant to feel completely alone, like the boy staring out from the void.

“I have a question,” I said suddenly, swirling my champagne around my glass absentmindedly. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Go ahead,” Ethan replied.

“Have there been any children in your family who were sent away for being wolfless?”

Ethan furrowed his brow and shook his head. “No. It’s just Edrick and I, anyway. Why do you ask?”

“I’ve just been learning a lot about werewolves lately,” I replied. “I’d like to know more.”

Ethan paused for a moment, thinking, before speaking again. “Have you heard the story of the Golden Wolf?”