

Chapter 7

Ella POV

When David's eyes met mine, he smiled brightly. It was a genuine smile, and it took me off guard. Then I realized why he was so happy: everyone around him was looking at me in shock, and he liked the attention.

He stepped away from the group and put his arm around my waist.

"This is Ella," he said, introducing me to the women. "My fiancée."

The women all turned their attention to me, leaving Amanda to pout on her own.

"It's so nice to meet you," the first woman said. I reached out my hand to her, and she shook it.

"It's nice to meet you too," I replied. Then I turned to the second woman and smiled. "Nice to see you again."

"It's nice to see you too," she said weakly.

"Are you all right?" I asked. "You seem a little shaken."

She smiled awkwardly. "I'm just surprised. You seem so different than the last time I saw you."

"You're nothing like the spoiled little princess I've heard stories about," the first woman said.

I raised my eyebrows at her in faux surprise. "Is that what you've heard about me?" I asked. "Who would say such a thing?"

Both of the women glanced at Amanda, and she looked away from all of

us.

Excited whispers started up in the crowd, and we turned to see Alexander approaching the podium. I pulled away from David's grip and moved forward with the crowd so that I wouldn't miss the speech. David and the rest of his friends followed after me.

Many of the women in the crowd were whispering and giggling as Alexander waved and smiled in greeting. I couldn't blame them for their reactions. After all, Alexander is a very attractive, powerful, and eligible bachelor.

He stepped up to the microphone and began to speak.

"Thank you all for coming out to celebrate with us today. I'm excited to open this shopping center, not just for the enjoyment of my own pack but for all of us. I want this to be a safe and inclusive place for all of our packs to interact together."

This was the first time I had seen him speak publicly in a long time. I could see why people were drawn to Alexander as a leader—he's a charismatic speaker, which is an important trait for any politician.

Every woman in the crowd was hanging on his every word, and I could feel the crowd shift as people pressed in, trying to get closer to the stage.

"Ridiculous," David said snidely. "He's just putting on this show for attention."

"I'm proud to be able to bring this to the capital for everyone to enjoy, so I hope that you'll all come in today, check out what we have to offer, and have a good time."

Ahead of us, there was a row of cameras and some journalists jotting

down notes. The crowd applauded Alexander's short speech, and as the sound died down, one of the reporters called out in a joking tone, "You've had a lot of success lately, so when can we expect a marriage announcement?"

Cheers and giggles rose up from the crowd, with various girls throwing their arms up in the air and waving to get his attention.

"Being unmarried could be seen as a disadvantage for an Alpha King candidate," the reporter added.

Alexander's eyes flicked to mine, and for a second, we made eye contact. Then he looked back at the crowd, and with a sly smile on his face, he said, "Actually, I've already fallen in love with a wonderful girl. Hopefully, she'll marry me someday."

My mouth fell open in shock, and I could hear the crowd having a similar reaction. Some people even booed, and I'm pretty sure I heard one woman crying. Mostly, what I heard were groans of disappointment.

But I couldn't help but smile. I had to admit that I admired Alexander—he was confident, willing to take risks, and charming, far more so than people who played it safe to get ahead in life.

He knew that by making a statement like that, the media would be scrambling to find out who his mystery love was. He could also trust that they wouldn't uncover anything because there was nothing to uncover—we'd never actually met in person before today.

It would get him all the attention and positive gossip around town, and winning people over could only be done if they were thinking and talking about him. Plus, he was setting the stage for our eventual announcement.

He said a few more words, welcoming everyone in and saying that he

hoped everyone had a great day. Then he left the stage with more smiles and waves to the crowd.

I had accomplished what I came to do for the day, but I knew that I couldn't just leave—it would look suspicious if I did. As I was trying to decide what to do, Amanda linked her arm with mine.

"Are you up for some shopping?" she asked. "I can tell by your outfit today that you need to refresh your wardrobe and find something a little more fashionable."

I wanted to roll my eyes. It was obvious to me now that she just wanted to make sure I looked immature in public. She wanted herself to look better in comparison. I wish I'd noticed this about her far earlier.

It made sense to me now why it was so easy for her, in our other life, to make people see her as the better Luna, the more mature and reasonable one. No one could know that I was acting as I did because of Amanda's advice.

"I don't know about fashionable," I said, "but the Alpha Council is coming up, and I think I'd like to go with my father. I should probably buy an appropriate outfit for that."

My father had always asked me to go to the council with him, but I hadn't wanted to. He used to stress how important it was that I learned how to be a leader. I knew he hoped that I would be able to learn more about pack affairs, but he always let me go when I acted spoiled in front of him.

We both thought we had more time with each other.

I remembered this particular council meeting—he had wanted me to go so badly because my engagement had just been announced. And I agreed this time.

I had the benefit of hindsight now and understood a lot more about all of the packs in our area, but the 20-year-old me in the original timeline knew absolutely nothing.

This time, I was going to go with my father to the council meeting. After all, anything that I could learn would come in handy.

"Yeah, you'll definitely want to make a good impression for that," Amanda said, smiling. "You're going to need something bright and eye-catching. You want to make sure everyone notices you—something flamboyant that will show people you're not like the rest, that you're unique and have a unique voice to bring to the discussion."

I stared at Amanda. Has this really worked on me in the past? I had trusted her so blindly. I was embarrassed by my past self for being so easy to manipulate.

"That's why I always need your advice."

Amanda grinned at me; I could tell that she thought she had won. "That's what friends are for," she said happily. "I'll help you find the perfect dress for the council meeting. Trust me, people won't be able to take their eyes off you."

"Thanks," I said softly.

I would play along with Amanda, but I wouldn't allow her to make a fool of me again.

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