

## 3 In His Shadow

10 minutes earlier....

Rian POV

"Tonight's the big night," Taegan rubs his hands together as we stop at a red light, smiling with that knowing grin, like he has some big secret he is just waiting for someone to ask him about. "Are you excited?" he slaps the top center of my back right between my shoulder blades, making it bend and me grunt.

"Why would I be excited?" I snapped. "You are the one who made me come. I don't know what I'm doing here." I was content staying back in the resort, but Taegan forced me to get ready for the Alpha she-wolf's birthday party.

I didn't need to be here. I agreed to come, but once at the resort, I was quickly invited to lounge along the pool in a cabana with some visiting college girls, and that sounded much more appealing than this destined-to-be-awkward party.

The girls wanted all three of us, but Callum gruy muttered a "no thanks," Taegan lied and said he was taken, so that just left me. I had absolutely no reason to refuse, but Taegan had to pipe up with a "He's taken too," then pulled me along with him.

Now I'm sitting in the passenger seat of the Audi convertible Taegan borrowed from the resort owners, feeling pretty sour about going to a party for a girl that doesn't even like me. I am reluctant to see that offended look on her face that she gets when she sees me. It hurts in my chest every time.

At least her friends seem to like me. A little too much, at least among the girls. It just puts me in an awkward place. Taegan and Callum are always insistent that you don't mess around with women in your own pack, and they extend that rule to the pack in Miami. I'm not a true member of the pack, so you would think I wouldn't be held to that standard, but Taegan insists I follow that rule as well.

Last time we were there, when one of Rosie's friends nearly shoved her tongue down my throat at a pool party, Taegan scolded me quite harshly for some time afterward. He apologized later, saying he just didn't want me to get myself in a situation where I might get hurt later, but that just hurt my pride even more.

It's hard growing up with him as my "nephew". He's a year younger than me, but he acts much older. He always has. His power as a witch and the only one with a Lycan counterpart in the world is no joke as well. He is this all-powerful being, and I feel insignificant in his shadow.

I love him, but he is one of the main reasons I want to be back in my own realm. I love my mother. I love my stepfather, Max, as well as all my nieces and extended family, and I do love Taegan ercely, but my erce love is nothing when compared to him. Anything that might be deemed erce about me is nothing compared to him.

It's suffocating.

I stayed quiet the rest of the way to the Crystal Moon pack house. Callum is cackling away, eating a bag of doritos in the back seat, laughing at Taegan's windblown hair as we drive over the bridge. Callum always has long messy curls, and my hair is too short to easily mess up. Taegan's carefully tamed and gelled down blonde locks are sticking straight up. He looks like he just ran into a door and his hair stuck in place.

When we pull into the packhouse lot, Taegan chooses not to use the valet and just parks in a spot in the back, staring at himself in the rearview mirror to try and tame his hair again.

"That's what you get for leaving the top down, dipshit. I told you not to," Callum snorts, emptying the rest of the bag of chips by dumping it into his mouth.

"We're in f\*\*\*\*\*g Miami. Why drive a convertible with the top up?" Taegan retorts.

"Look at your hair," I muttered while attempting to wipe the smile off my face. "That's why."

When he is happy enough with his still slightly windblown hair, we get the gifts we brought from the trunk. I don't know what these two got her, but Axel, my much older Alpha stepbrother, helped me to pick out a necklace that she could wear in both wolf form and human form. It is made of platinum and the length is enough to accommodate her neck size when she shifts. Bailey got Axel one for his birthday a few years ago and he hasn't taken it off since.

I found a buttery pendant to put on it, a blue topaz stone makes up the buttery's body and the wings are an intricate pattern of platinum metal on either side. She seemed enraptured with the butteries on Taegan's tattoo the last time we were here, and when I saw the design it made me think of her.

It was pricey, but something drove me to buy it. It was like a nagging feeling in the back of my head that I needed to get it for her. I even infused a bit of my magic into the stone, using my siren abilities to cast a protection spell on the jewel.

She is to be an Alpha. I am sure she could use the added protection if she is anything like her mother, who is well-known to be a tad bit reckless. My stepfather dislikes Rosie's mother because of her recklessness, but I think the woman can be quite fun.

I think dad just can't stand anyone who is more crude and headstrong than he is, except for my mother.

The thought of any harm coming to Rosie made my chest feel tight and uncomfortable, almost like it gets at the thought of her disliking me. It's unsettling, and I wish I knew where the irritating feeling stemmed from.

Many people don't like me. I'm a fairy prince living in the rough wilderness among nothing but testosterone-lled werewolves. I have no desire to work the lumber or mining elds and spend my time lounging with my nieces and family instead of training like the male members of the pack. I get a lot of dislike for many reasons. I never cared much before. I don't know why I care so much about this one girl thousands of miles away not liking me. I also don't know why I went out of my way to buy her an expensive gift and infuse it with my own magic if she doesn't like me. It was just something I had to do, even without knowing the reason.

Now that we are here, that feeling is stronger than ever before in my chest, and I just wish Taegan would have let me stay back at the resort with the group of women that actually wanted to be around me. If Rosie scoffs or dislikes my gift, I don't know how I will react.

I do know. It will hurt, but it will solidify my resolve to go back to Alfheimr, where I belong.

We were a bit late for the party, which was in full swing when we walked in. Right away, Taegan was greeted by nearly everyone. He is always sought after at these types of events. The visiting Alphas from other packs always seem eager to introduce him to their unmated daughters, no doubt hoping he might be their mate. He always refuses politely, and this time is no different. He waves away a lot of the attention and heads straight for Alpha Parker, Rosie's dad.

Alpha Parker used not to like Taegan much, but since Taegan stated he isn't Rosie's mate, the two of them get along much better. Alpha Parker is just ercely protective of his daughter. I can understand that. I even appreciate it. I like knowing she is being treasured and protected. Again, I can't quite explain why I feel this way, but I do.

Callum joins Taegan in greeting the birthday girl's dad.

I chose to walk ahead of the two, not in the mood for forced pleasantries yet. I'm still ghting that uncomfortable feeling in my chest. It's not just in my chest now. My entire body is buzzing, this air of anticipation around me. It's like my body is a live wire, waiting for something to connect to. There's an electric current traveling through my blood. All my senses come alive with this feeling, and I can't understand what is wrong with me until my eyes land on her.

Rosie.

She is more beautiful than ever before. Her t body is wrapped in an elegant fabric, the shimmering design is magnificent, but pales in comparison to her. She has more are to her hips and a more womanly shape than when I last saw her. She is stunning.

Everything about her is stunning. Her eyes, her lips, even the bridge of her nose and the way her mouth almost forms a plump heart shape I nd enticing. I can't take my eyes off her. It seems like every single one of her features was hand carved by angels, with only my preferences in mind. Even the way her eyebrows pull down I nd beautiful.

She is mine. I can feel it. The buzzing in my body is reaching out for her, like lightning ready to strike. She is what the feeling inside me was trying to connect to.

I want her. Every ber of my being wants this girl, but before I can move to claim her, someone cuts into my path, interrupting my desirous thoughts with an aggravating squeal.

"Rian!" The impertinent girl from the pool party last time I was here wrapped her arms around my neck. She says something more, but I can hardly hear her through the violent ringing in my ears, the electricity inside me revolting from her touch.

I want to push her away, but before I can, a deep low growl causes me to freeze. Rosie was glaring at me with so much anger, I didn't know what to do.

This is her friend. Do I push her away harshly, or is Rosie going to handle this? I don't want this rude girl on me. Rosie had to see that. What should I do?

I want to beckon her for help, but she just snarls and turns away, pulling her friend along with her as she heads out through a door at the back of the room.

That's it? Is she just going to walk away?

"Get. Off," I sneered through gritted teeth, jarring my head back to remove the girl's hands without having to touch her.

I can't take the revolting touch of her hands on my skin a moment longer.

At my words, everything around me seems to have come to a halt. I glared at the girl whose name I don't even remember. I'm unable to keep the disgust off my face or the revulsion out of my voice.

"Whoever you are, do not think you can touch me freely. It disgusts me. Pathetic."

I'm being way harsher than necessary, but the energy buzzing inside me is loathsome, wanting retaliation for the one it was calling for turning away from me. It's seeking revenge, blaming this girl for Rosie's scorn.

"Rian," Taegan is beside me, gripping my arm. I can feel his magic latching onto mine, siphoning the negative energy from me. I didn't even realize the anger in me was causing my magic to are, burning in my hands and through my body.

The girl in front of me was shaking in fear. Good. She will think twice before touching me again.

Taegan leads me away, continuing to siphon my magic as we go. I'm still reeling over what just happened. It felt like my world was coming into focus, only to crumble apart a few moments later. Everything in me was moving towards her, pulling me in her direction like she was my reason for even breathing. It felt like my heart was beating just for her. The moment she walked away, everything inside me ignited in ames, torching my insides, wanting to do whatever to renew and x what had just happened.

What did just happen? My mind is so muddled between rage and regret, I can't quite make right of anything just yet.

When Taegan and I are alone in a hallway, somewhere towards the back of the pack house, he turns to face me, his expression somber.

"What happened?" he demands. He doesn't ask. He demands. The Lycan in him doesn't ask anything when its protective tendencies are triggered. He demands answers to x whatever problem arises.

"I don't know," I grit my teeth. "But I need to x it."

I tried to push past him to head back toward the direction we had come from, so I could nd Rosie, but he stopped me with a rm hand on my shoulder.

"Fix what? What happened, Rian? Did Rosie reject you?"

My eyes opened wide at his question. Reject me? Why would she?....

"She's my mate?" I felt stunned again, and then something dawned on me. My brows pulled downward with suspicion. "You.... you knew?"

His lips press tightly together, and I know his answer before he even tells me. That is why he wanted me to come so desperately tonight. It is why he always demands I come to Miami with him, and why he was so angry when Rosie's friend kissed me last time.

"How long? How long have you known?"

I feel I already know before he even opens his mouth. "For a while."

Now my anger is aring towards him. My hands are glowing again as my blood boils. "And you didn't think to tell me?!"

"I couldn't," Taegan rakes a hand down his face. "I'm not allowed to disclose things I know to mortals. You know that."

"SHE HATES ME!" I snapped. "She.... she hates me," I repeated. "And she wanted you. It's always you."

I have a mate, a werewolf mate, a woman so perfect and beautiful, but she doesn't want me. She never wanted me, even now after feeling the pull we have for each other.

She wants the man whose shadow I have lived in my entire life here on Earth.

My magic continues to ravage my body, anger still coursing through me. I'm just so.... So pissed at Taegan. I'm pissed at myself.

"She isn't in love with me, Rian. She's not. She just liked the idea of me."

"And she is repulsed by the idea of me." So much so that it took a single touch from her friend to cause her to turn away from me.

"I'll talk to her," Taegan said.

"Don't bother," I scoff. "You've done enough."

I never thought there would come a day when the erce love I held for my nephew would turn into erce disdain. It may not even be his fault, but right now, that's all I can see. His fault in all this.

The promises he told Rosie when they were young children were well-known to everyone. Before the incident that brought me back to my mother, when he gained his Lycan and traveled through the moon goddess's realm, he was dead set on being Rosie's mate. He told her they would be mates, he planted the idea in her head, and then he left me in the dark to the truth.

He may have insisted since that time they would not be mates, but he still kept me in the dark and it almost felt like he was still stringing her along. Why else was he coming to Miami so often? I don't understand what he was doing all these years. Was he coming here and dragging me along so much for my benet? It didn't help.

If I can't convince Rosie to not let the connection between us go, I don't know I can keep the connections I have with her anymore. I don't know if my heart could take any more of a life living in this man's shadow. If I can't step into the light of her world, then my time here is done. I'll go back to Alfheimr and leave this world behind for good.