



# CHOICE

“No.”

“Spencer, we understand that you don’t want to do it,” Bryan said, “but you are the best choice.”

“I already said ‘no.’” The other Betas had all lost their minds somewhere in the past few hours. How could they think he was capable of doing this? Spencer wasn’t the right person for the job; they should realize that by now. “If you would all just take a breather, you’d realize that we need to think this over—”

“We don’t have a choice,” Tala said. “Someone—one of us—has to step up and take over. Someone has to do it, and from everyone present in this room, you’re the best option we have.”

Spencer didn’t move while his gaze flitted through the room, past each and every one of his friends who sat there. He rubbed his hand over his forehead and grunted. “We should focus on finding Kai. If he were here, this whole situation wouldn’t even be a thing. We still haven’t explored every option we have in order to find him. If we manage to locate him, we could—”

“Listen,” Ray said and looked at him from across the table. “I know this might come as a surprise to you, and that you don’t want to hear it, but there are only two scenarios here. Either one of us steps up to fill in for Kai, or the Leyum will be completely in charge. Is that what you want to happen?”

“No, of course I don’t want that,” Spencer said. “But if we could only find Kai, we wouldn’t be having this discussion. We need to make finding

him our priority, instead of discussing who'll be in charge. Kai wouldn't think this is wise, either. I'm certain he'd want us all to—"

"To what?" Rajini raised her eyebrows. "Let the Leyum run the pack? Put them in charge of us? This is probably exactly what they're hoping for. You know how they are, and what they think of us. They'll be thrilled if we gave them the opportunity to be in charge, and we can't let that happen. It's been two weeks since Kai's gone missing, and we all know we have to do something before it all goes to hell."

Spencer knew she had a few valid points. They had absolutely no idea where Kai was. Or what had happened to him, for that matter, although they had a hunch. "What scares me the most, is that we don't feel him through the Bloodbond anymore." It had happened only minutes after he disappeared in the bathroom during that last Leyum meeting. Spencer still remembered the moment Kai's end of the bond had grown cold. As if someone had knocked Kai out and then injected him with something to disconnect him.

"Like they have done with the others who have gone missing," Bryan said. "They all got cut off."

"Exactly. So my conclusion is that IR is probably behind it all. And they were smart." Spencer sighed. There hadn't been a scent to follow for them at the scene. Everything had been wiped clean. "We have nothing to go on."

"It has to be IR. There's no other option." Rajini tapped her fingers on the table. "And with what we know now... we can't even be sure if he'll be the same once we do have him back. Jade wasn't the same anymore, either. So even if he returns to us, he might not be able to fulfill his tasks as Ghuardian for God knows how long. It took Jade weeks to get better, and she still isn't fully recovered, if you ask me. And I don't want to be the bearer of bad news, but for all we know, he might not even survive this. We need to keep that in mind as well."

"That is exactly why I'm saying we need to find Kai first," Spencer said. "The longer he stays missing, the worse it will be when we do find him."

So, again: I think we should prioritize finding Kai, or this whole pack will crumble within weeks.”

“I agree that we need to find him as soon as we can,” Rajini said, “but leaving the pack without a leader in the meantime won’t do us any good. I know all of this is not what we had in mind, and by the Moon, I miss Kai too, and I’m worried sick, but we have to move forward for the good of the pack. If we don’t take action and the Leyum does take over, who knows what will become of us? Can you imagine what would happen if they let Trevor take over Kai’s position as Ghuardian?”

Spencer knew Rajini was right, though he didn’t like to admit it. He wasn’t ready for this; he wasn’t suitable for taking on Kai’s role. But he saw everyone looked equally determined, and they all nodded when he made eye contact with them.

“I vote for Spencer to fill Kai’s position for the time being,” Bryan said. “Until Kai returns and is able to take on his role again.” Then he raised his hand high in the air.

Rajini’s hand immediately shot up, and Ray’s hand followed. Tala glanced at Spencer for a moment, but then slowly raised his hand too.

Spencer sank back in his chair with a sigh. “I haven’t gotten the same training for this as Kai. He started preparing the moment he could walk and talk. Nor do I have the information he has.”

“We all know that,” Tala said. “But to be fair, out of everyone of us, you’re the closest to Kai. You’ve known him the longest, and you grew up together, here in the mansion, when Kai’s father was still Ghuardian. And don’t forget that you’ve helped him the most with the IR related things and also with the Leyum and even press stuff. You know Kai’s job the best, which makes you the best choice. I know I’m repeating myself here, but it’s true, and you need to know. Rajini is too new; she doesn’t have enough experience to pull it off. Ray might murder a Leyum member at his first meeting with them.” Tala looked at Ray with an apologetic look. “Sorry, but it’s true, and you know it.” He turned back to Spencer. “Bryan would probably just laugh at any of their ideas or give some sarcastic

comment. We're all here to help you out with this, but you remain the best choice to lead for the time being."

"And why not you, Tala?" Spencer knew Rajini was too new, Ray too temperamental, and Bryan too full of jokes, but Tala might be capable. "You could be good for this, too."

Tala stared at him and then breathed in. "I'm not sure if I can add that to my plate, if I'm being honest. I'm still learning how to deal with my leg, and I'm organizing classes to train people in using firearms. We might be needing them in the near future. And I know you work as head of the tech department, but Selene is a really good back-up for you there, if you would let her."

"You're making more sense than I like," Spencer said. Only, he didn't know how to handle meetings with other Alphas like Kai did. Let alone how to handle the Leyum. He should've paid more attention to what Kai had once told him about his training; that would've been useful now. He didn't have any practice, no help, nor guidance to get through this. "What will the Leyum say about us deciding this?"

"I'm certain they won't be happy with what we've decided, but we're in this together," Bryan said. "You're not alone, and we're here to help you in any way we can. Just say the word, and we'll get it done. What I think we should do, is go to the next Leyum meeting, where we put you forward as the interim Ghuardian and then go from there. Maybe they'll respond quite calmly to the news. If we don't do it soon, they might be the first to push someone forward, which will only make it harder."

"And what about Boris?" Spencer asked.

"What about him?" Rajini's eyebrows furrowed.

"What if he decides he wants to step back in and take his son's place until Kai's back? He's been the Ghuardian for over thirty years. If he wants, he could claim that position again, and the Leyum might agree to it faster than they would to me being a candidate."

"I don't think he will step up," Ray said. "When I went by Boris and Vivienne last week, they were devastated. Especially Kai's mom; I doubt Boris will leave her in this state. I'm not certain why he stepped down

prematurely when Kai was eighteen, but I doubt the Leyum will want Boris to be in charge again. Maybe you should go see him. He might be able to give advice and help you out.”

“I could try that.” Spencer rubbed his hand over his face. “Well, alright, I’ll try my best. I give you my word. But you have to promise me that finding Kai remains our main focus. We all need our Ghuardian, Alpha, and our friend back as soon as possible.”



## HEARTBEAT

“Jade?” Trevor’s voice bounced off the walls of the apartment. “Where is the vest of my black suit?”

“In the wardrobe of the bedroom.”

“Do you actually believe that I haven’t looked in there yet?” Trevor raised his eyebrow at her while he closed the cuffs of his dress shirt. “How about you go take a good look for yourself, if you think you’re so clever.”

Jade’s chest constricted at his tone, and she grabbed the kitchen towel to dry her hands. She turned the tap off and walked to their bedroom, where she stopped in front of the closet. She pulled the doors open, seeing the hanger where the vest should be, empty. She blinked at it. Only yesterday, she had ironed the wretched thing and hung it up on the hanger and put it here in the closet. Her fingers quickly moved between the hangers and the rest of the clothes while panic settled deep in the pit of her stomach. Shit. Trevor needed that vest for his Leyum meeting, and he had to leave soon. She didn’t have another vest, not this fast.

She took a step back and stared at the open closet. She was certain the vest should be in there, unless Trevor had taken it out earlier to put on and left it somewhere else around the house while getting ready. A lump formed in her throat, and she tried to swallow it down as she closed the doors of the dresser again. Now she would have to confront him and ask if he had left it somewhere lying around—

“See, you can’t find it either, can you?” Trevor’s nose hovered only an inch from hers, and she had to crane her neck to look up at him. His scent wrapped around her when he stepped into her space. His body almost pressed into hers, and she swallowed.

“I’ll find it for you,” she said quickly. “It has to be around here somewhere. I ironed it yesterday and hung it away immediately after, because I knew you’d need that vest for your meeting today. Maybe it’s in the living room or the kitchen?”

He grabbed her upper arm, his fingers digging deep into her skin. “Or maybe you forgot all about it, and now you’re lying to my face.” His eyes darkened.

“Trevor, please,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper as she stared up at him. “I’m not lying to you. I swear I ironed it yesterday, right after you told me you had that meeting today. I know how important this is for you.” She winced at the force of his hold on her arm. “If you let go of me, I can go look for it right now.”

His gaze ran her up and down, and then he let go of her arm. “Quickly.” He pushed her towards the door and out of the bedroom. “I have to leave in the next five minutes.”

“I know.” She walked back to the living room on swift feet. “I don’t understand why—”

“You don’t need to understand. This is Leyum’s business. It would be wise of you to stay out of it. This goes way over your head anyway. The only thing you need to worry about, is finding my clothes. Or do you want to make me look bad in front of the Leyum?”

Jade glanced at Trevor over her shoulder, swallowed, and shook her head slowly. She didn’t know what to say to him. He was already on edge, and she didn’t want to make things worse than they already were. Her attention wavered to the apartment as she started to go through it room by room in search of the missing piece of clothing.

With a groan, Trevor fell down on the couch and dropped his shoes on the carpet with a loud thud. “Nikolai is still not back, and today we’ll decide who will step up in his place.” He put on his left shoe and tapped his foot against the small table, making dirt fall to the ground. “I’m one of the top candidates for the position of Ghuardian.”

She stopped moving and turned to him, seeing the proud grin that was plastered on his face. Quickly, she flashed him a smile. “You would be very worthy of that title.”

He stood up from the sofa. “It’s good riddance. Nikolai was a complete idiot. I still don’t understand how he got the rest of the Leyum to agree to make a damn female a Beta. They’re going to regret making her one at some point, just you wait and see.”

“I’ve met her, the Beta. She’s a really nice person. So maybe they did it because she’s—”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Have you located my vest yet?” He stared at her empty hands and clacked his tongue. “Maybe you should try to keep your damn focus on what you’re supposed to do. That’s hard enough for you as it is.”

Jade bit her bottom lip hard and cast her gaze down to the floor, mumbling a quick apology. Her heart drummed in her ears as she turned around and searched for the vest again. To her, Nikolai had been a good Ghuardian. One who valued females equally as he did males. She had hoped Nikolai would’ve marked the beginning of a new age among their kind. But now he was gone. She couldn’t understand why Trevor didn’t see it the same way. When she’d been at the mansion where the Ghuardian lived, she’d been taken care of by their healer, and she had talked to Nikolai and his Betas a few times. They were all kind to her. They never looked at her as if she was less than them, even though they stood way higher up the ladder.

Her fingers grabbed a blanket that hung over the couch to put it back in place, when she saw the black vest lying underneath. “Here it is,” she said, and she held it up. “Maybe you put it here before you went to take your shower?”

“So now it’s my fault that you’re misplacing the laundry?” Trevor snatched it from between her hands and slid it on. He straightened his sleeves and turned his attention back to her. “I’ll be home around nine.”

“I will have dinner waiting for you the moment you get back.” She forced a smile on her lips. “I’m making steaks, your favorite.”



“Good.” He stepped closer to her, resting his hand on the back of her neck, and he dragged her a tad closer. His fingers gripped at the roots of her hair, and he bit down on her bottom lip and kissed her roughly. “I’ll see you tonight.” He let go of her and left.

Jade exhaled the moment the door fell shut behind him and her shoulders relaxed a tad. The knot in her stomach slowly unfurled, and she sank down on the couch. Her breathing and heartbeat slowed down again. She looked at the dirt from Trevor’s shoes on the ground, and squeezed her eyes shut. He’d done it on purpose, she could feel it in her gut. Now she had to clean that up too before he was back. If she hadn’t, he’d probably have another fit. She forced herself on her feet and grabbed the vacuum. First, she would get rid of the dirt, then she could finally finish the dishes and prepare everything for dinner.

She had lost count of how often she had dreamed about their bond being gone. That she would wake up with the mating bond vanished and her finally being free. Free to do whatever she wanted. Free of him.

Her eyes closed the moment she felt Trevor leave the building and put more distance between them. With every passing second and every extra foot between them, she breathed more easily.



## VOTE

“Are you feeling alright, Spencer?” Bryan asked, holding the door open for him to step inside the Leyum building.

“How do you think I’m feeling?” Spencer sighed. “No, I’m not feeling alright.” His hand clutched around the handle of his backpack, which contained his laptop. “I have absolutely no idea what to expect. We’ve been in so many of these meetings with Kai before, but I’ve never spoken once in any of them. Kai was good at these sorts of things. I’m not.”

“You don’t know whether you’re good or bad. You haven’t tried it yet.”

Spencer glanced at Bryan, knowing his friend was probably right, though he doubted he would be able to fill Kai’s shoes. The past few nights he’d barely been able to sleep because of what he would be doing today. He knew he had to convince the Leyum to believe in him, even though he didn’t even believe in himself. He couldn’t let them end up running the show. None of the Betas would be able to work with them, so he had to try.

Bryan patted him on the back. “You’re going to do great. You always do better than you think, no matter what comes your way. And as we’ve said before: we believe in you, and we trust in you. You’re the best choice for this; don’t let the Leyum make you think otherwise. They might try to drive you crazy, but you’re the best leader this pack can wish for with Kai being gone.”

“That’s easy enough for you to say.”

“That might be true.” Bryan grinned softly. “But I do believe in you, probably more than I’ll ever believe in myself.”

Spencer sighed and just nodded, indicating he was done with the conversation, as he saw other members of the Leyum walk into the building behind them. His stomach clenched while he heard chatter drift through the halls of the old building. “I still don’t get why they wanted to hold the meeting here, again. Especially after Kai only went missing from this place less than three weeks ago.”

“Because they’re old idiots,” Bryan said underneath his breath. “You’d think they’d be more careful now, but apparently they like to dance with danger.”

“Ah, it’s great to see two Betas here. I thought you might not attend today after what happened.” Anya caught up with them in the hallway and smiled at both of them. “But it’s good that you’re here. We have important things to discuss.”

Political games, that’s all these were, and Spencer wasn’t ready for it. He never would. “Yes, we’re aware. I hear people are already suggesting who they think should be the stand-in Ghuardian.”

“Yes.” Anya leaned a bit closer. “They mostly only utter their own names, but we know better, don’t we?” She winked and walked away.

Bryan stood frozen, staring after her. “Ever since Rajini managed to win her over to our side, she sort of creeps me out.”

“At least we have one member on our team,” Spencer said. He trailed after Anya towards the meeting room.

Ten minutes later, everyone was seated around the table. Spencer remained standing the entire time, with Bryan stationed a bit behind him. He’d done it on purpose, just as they had discussed. He would be the last one to move and take a seat. The empty chair at the head of the table—Kai’s seat—made his throat tighten. He shouldn’t be in here, he should be out looking for his friend. Every day that passed was another day they could lose him.

This was it. All or nothing. He slowly counted to ten in his head and then walked to Kai’s seat, grabbing the back of the chair.

“Mister Tanner, what do you think you’re doing?” Trevor asked, his voice filling the room as he rose from his seat.

Spencer fought against freezing up and turned his attention to Trevor, keeping a neutral face. “I’m trying to sit down, as you can see.” It was supposed to be an easy and neutral answer, but Spencer knew better than that. This was him laying claim to Kai’s position without permission. He knew this could be taken as a violent action, but Bryan was there with him to keep him safe.

“You’re trying to sit down?” Trevor raised his eyebrow and shoved his chair back. He walked to the head of the table, stopping on the other side of the chair. “Who gave you the authority to take the Ghuardian’s seat?”

“Nikolai’s Betas, who are next in rank, voted that I’d act as interim Ghuardian until his return.”

“So, you believe you only need the votes from your Beta friends to be able to take Nikolai’s place?”

Spencer managed to suppress the sigh that threatened to escape. He wanted to punch a wall—or Trevor’s face. He had known things would get complicated once he stepped in, but Trevor always managed to make things messier than they already were. The male had a true gift for being a pain in the ass. “It was the smartest thing to do. With all due respect, we have far more experience running the pack than you. We helped Nikolai with his day-to-day activities and with all the processes and logistics required to run a pack this size. We know how to deal with pack matters here and across the borders. We already handled the soldiers, defenses and the finances. You, as the Leyum, embodied another function—providing guidance and keeping up with traditions. If you want to put forward one of the Leyum members, we’ll have to look for an extra Leyum member on top of a Ghuardian, which will only make the process longer.”

“I do believe that the decision who will be interim is one that should be made by the Leyum and not you.” Trevor’s hand gripped the chair too, his knuckles turning white.

Spencer placed his backpack on the edge of the table and crossed his arms over his chest, looking at Trevor. “Well, alright then,” he said. “How about you all cast a vote to see whether I should step in or one of you?” He could see Bryan standing by the side, his face dead pale. At least now

he'd ripped the bandage off. He didn't want a long discussion about it, and while he feared no one but Anya was on his side, he'd have an answer soon. Trevor or him.

"I think that's an excellent idea." A wide grin spread over Trevor's face.

Spencer shouldn't have done this, he knew that, but what other options did he truly have? He looked around the table, and his gaze met Anya's, who nodded in his direction with an encouraging smile.

Trevor stepped away from the chair and turned his body towards the rest of the people in the room. "Dear members of the Leyum, as you are all aware, we've been working together for five years now, and today we're at the brink of our own doom. We're missing our beloved Ghuardian, because his own Betas couldn't keep him safe."

Spencer's hand clenched into a tight fist. Trevor had no idea what had actually occurred and Tala had done everything he could to prevent it from happening. He wanted to punch Trevor in the face even more now to make him stop talking, to be able to defend his friends. But most importantly, he wanted to defend Kai. And yet, he stayed quiet and forced down the words that burned on his tongue.

"In the past, it would've made sense for a Beta to take the place of Ghuardian in case anything happened to him," Trevor said. "Today, I cannot say that this is in our best interests. They all failed at their job. Therefore I would suggest making one of us the interim Ghuardian. A Leyum member instead of a Beta."

"On what are you basing your conclusions?" Anya asked. "Yes, I understand your concern, but neither Nikolai nor Spencer have done anything to ever jeopardize our pack. Spencer is more than eligible to take Nikolai's place, as stated in our laws."

"They brought war on us," Trevor said through clenched teeth.

Spencer bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself from throwing words back at him. They had never brought war on their pack. Not intentionally.

"Is that truly so?" Anya raised her eyebrow at him. "So if it were you sitting at the head of this table, you wouldn't have gotten us into a war? That's an odd claim, Trevor, even for you."

Spencer could kiss Anya. He'd never liked any of the Leyum members, but Anya had proven to be a loyal friend after she helped Rajini get her Beta status. Anya had always had their back in her own way, something he couldn't say about the other members. Slowly, he turned his attention back to Trevor, who looked redder than he had before.

"I didn't say—"

"You just did, Trevor." Anya slowly rose from her seat and placed her hands on the table, looking at each and every member. "Dear Leyum, as mister Tanner already suggested, I'd like to hold a vote on who will become our interim Ghuardian. So, without further ado, all in favor of mister Tanner taking Nikolai's place until he's back, please raise your hand."

Trevor growled lowly in his throat.

This was it. Spencer's gaze skidded over the table, and he swallowed. Here his future would be written, and the future of the pack with it.

Anya's hand shot up firmly. At least someone stood behind him. Then one hand after the other rose in the air. Only a few members didn't budge, including Trevor.

"An eleven to eight vote. The majority wins in this case so that settles it then." Anya turned to Trevor with a smile. "Please take your seat so we can finally start this meeting."

Trevor seemed frozen on his spot for a moment. After a few long seconds, he finally walked to his seat, sat down, and glared at Spencer from across the table.

"Well then. Mister Tanner, if you please." She waved her hand at the chair. "Can we call you Spencer?"

Spencer nodded, his heart hammering in his chest.

"Good. Spencer, you'll be taking over Nikolai's responsibilities until he's safely back where he belongs."

"It will be my honor." Spencer bowed his head and smiled brightly. He opened his backpack and pulled out his paperwork and laptop, which he placed on the table before he sat down on Kai's chair. The responsibility that came with the seat he was in made him feel like the world rested on

his shoulders and panic washed over him in thick waves. The only good thing that had happened today was that Trevor hadn't become Ghuardian. Now Spencer had to live up to everyone's expectations and try his best to make this work. For himself, for his friends, but more importantly for Kai.