



## LIFE

*She needs to die.*

Those four words kept ringing in her mind, no matter what she did. Kai's voice repeated them over and over. Whether she was in her room, downstairs, even with the others, it didn't matter. The infinite loop left her unable to shake off those words, even though Spencer had assured her Kai had been dreaming. Kai hadn't meant those words. They were merely a remnant of what had happened to him and hadn't been directed at her personally. Selene wanted to believe Spencer. Kai would never hurt her. He would never want her dead.

Kai *wanted* her.

"Selene?"

She glanced at the female Beta opposite her at the dining table. She hadn't been paying attention to anyone, not even to who walked in or left the room. Only Rajini remained; when she'd entered, Tala had been there too, and so had Caitlin.

"Are you okay?" Rajini asked, her eyebrows knitting together.

Selene's lips parted to say she was doing great. It was easier to lie out loud, but lying felt wrong. The Betas probably knew the truth. The Betas were her friends, or so she hoped. Technically they were Kai's friends, not hers. They were her brother's friends, who had taken her in. Maybe out of pity, or maybe even out of duty now that they knew she was pregnant with Kai's child. She didn't know. They couldn't say no when she needed help. So instead of telling Rajini the truth, she said, "I'm fine."

Rajini clasped her hands together and rested them on the table. “You realize I’m not actually buying that, right?”

The question hit Selene like a whip, and she raised her head. Most of the time, the Betas believed what she said, but today Rajini seemed to see right through her charade. Selene shifted uneasily on her seat, but immediately forced herself to sit still again with her back straight. “I’m fine, Rajini,” she said. “But thank you for asking.” She added a small smile.

“Spencer told us what happened this morning when you went to visit Kai in the infirmary. He told us what Kai said when he saw you there.”

She hadn’t expected anything less from Spencer. The Betas held meetings for almost every little thing that occurred, and when they weren’t in a meeting they still kept each other up to date via their phones. While Selene understood the need for them to keep each other informed, it felt like they shared every small detail.

She just had to keep breathing steadily and calm, then hopefully Rajini would believe her and back off. “Spencer said Kai was dreaming. A nightmare.”

“And you believe that?”

She didn’t understand why Rajini was asking her these difficult questions. It would be easier on all of them if she was feeling okay, or pretended to be. But then Rajini had to believe her.

“Selene?” Rajini asked again, her voice softer this time.

“I don’t know,” she said, her gaze skidding down to the table. Her shield started to crumble again. She tried to stay strong—she didn’t want to be a nuisance for the people she lived with—but they made her feel like a sheltered puppy, with them as her caretakers. These people weren’t her friends. Maybe they never would be.

Rajini leaned forward and reached out to her. “I think Spencer is right, though. I don’t think Kai meant what he said about you. But he’s restrained, so he won’t be able to hurt you either way.” Rajini’s warm hand wrapped around hers.

“I don’t like that he’s in restraints. He just came from a place where he was tied up, and now we’re doing the same to him.” It was wrong to be kept safe like that. It was wrong to tie Kai up. She wanted to go see him again, but Spencer had advised against it for now. And even though Kai would not be able to hurt her like this physically, his words still had.

“We don’t like it either. We hate to see him tied up, but we’re scared that he’ll hurt someone. I’m afraid he’ll hurt you. And after what he said to you, we’re not sure what he’ll try to do when he is untied. We still have no idea what happened to Kai in that place. Maybe IR did things to him. More than just hurt him physically.”

“Has he tried to hurt you or one of the other Betas?” Selene held Rajini’s stare. “Or did he tell you he wanted you to die too?”

Rajini shook her head. “No. But I haven’t seen him awake yet. We’re trying to keep the number of people who visit him to a minimum. Only Caitlin, Spencer, and you are allowed to visit him for the time being.”

“Why?” Kai would need his friends around him to get better.

“We’re scared that too many people might make him feel overstimulated. Caitlin says we need to try to keep the transition as smooth as we can for him. She found traces of drugs in Kai’s system. She wasn’t familiar with the kind of drug and what it did to Kai. She hopes he’ll be more himself when the last remnants wear off. We want him to realize by then that he’s home with all of us and with you.”

“Caitlin will be one of the people who’ll watch over his mental state and so she’ll be one of the few to see him. Spencer will be the other one to visit Kai regularly, as they grew up together and Spencer is Kai’s best friend. And you of course. As you’re his mate. You love him. We hope that will help him get better.”

“What about you, Ray, and Tala?”

“Caitlin wants to keep it at his closest friend and you for now.”

At times like this Selene wished she was closer to the Betas and could call them friends. That they weren’t was her own fault. Kai had asked to take their relationship public so they could be together for real, but she

hadn't wanted that. Selene knew she had hurt Kai by telling him no. The pain in his eyes at the rejection had nearly made her take back her words. It wasn't that she didn't love him, but she hadn't been ready to step into the spotlight beside him as the next Ginya. She hadn't been ready back then, and now she wasn't certain she'd ever be. Being together with Kai had consequences. She'd known that from the start.

"Would you like to go see him again later today? I can ask Caitlin whether you can go and visit him again. Maybe he's calmed down by now."

Of course she wanted to say yes. Talking to him sounded like a dream after so many months, and yet... she didn't know if he wanted to see her. His words had cut into her soul in more ways than she could explain.

"You don't have to go if you don't want to, Selene," Rajini said. "It's up to you. If you ever want to go visit, you can ask either Caitlin, or Spencer, or via any of the Betas. Caitlin will make the final call on the matter."

Selene didn't answer.

"Maybe he wasn't referring to you when he said those words. Caitlin said he's been having a lot of nightmares. Some of the doctors in IR were female, we saw so on the footage. It might be Kai was talking about one of them and not you."

Selene pulled away from Rajini and dropped her hands on her lap. She wanted to believe the Beta, but wasn't sure she could. It had sounded like it was directed at her. He'd had his eyes on her when he said it. Her fingers pressed against her abdomen. "I'm not sure how to tell him what happened."

"What do you mean?"

"Kai doesn't know I'm pregnant. I never had the chance to tell him. He might... What if he doesn't want it?"

"You think he doesn't want the baby?"

Selene shrugged. "It is possible. I mean... we never had a conversation about children. We never got that far. I know it's expected him to get an

heir, but I don't know whether he wanted that or not." She wasn't even certain whether *she* wanted their relationship taken to the next level.

"I'm confident Kai will be fine with it." Rajini directed a reassuring smile toward her.

"You don't know that. Neither of us can. Have you ever asked him about it?" She saw Rajini shake her head, and her voice gained some strength. "We talked about him telling you about our relationship. Not about kids. I didn't want him to tell you we were dating behind your backs. We weren't ready to go public yet, and you think he'll be fine with a pregnancy out of the blue?"

"You won't know until you tell him about it."

"Maybe we shouldn't tell him," Selene said. Ever since his outburst, she wasn't certain whether it would be wise to bring him up to speed. She frowned. "I've been thinking about all the ways of telling him, and I can't find one scenario in my mind that works out well."

"He has a right to know," Rajini said. "He's the father. And who knows, maybe it'll help him get better."

"I don't think that's your call to make." Selene looked at Rajini as her hands clenched to fists beneath the table. "How would that help him get better?" She couldn't believe it would help anyone. "If I tell him, it will only complicate matters."

"I—I'd think it might be like an extra reason for him to get better and to not think about killing anyone."

"You have no idea how hard this is on me already." The word 'killing' left an acid taste in the back of her throat. "Telling him I'm pregnant might make him spiral out of control. We don't know anything." Selene slowly rose from her chair, placing her hands on the table. "You're not allowed to tell him I'm pregnant. No one is allowed to tell him until I decide I want to."

"Selene, I honestly don't think that's wise. You can't hide your pregnancy. If he's conscious of his surroundings, he'll smell it the moment

you step into the room. He knows you. He knows your smell. Even we smell it on you.”

“It would be better if you stopped pretending to know everything. You don’t know shit about Kai and I. None of you do.”

Rajini pressed her lips to a thin line.

“I can wear his sweater when I go to see him and then I’ll tell him when I feel the time is right.”

“You’ll wear his sweater?”

“Yes. It would hide my stomach. And his sweater smells like him, so it might mask most of my scent.” The idea was worth a shot, at least. She wanted to talk to him again. She wanted to make sure he was okay before she told him everything. Her stomach wasn’t showing that much anyway; he didn’t have to know. “You have to promise you won’t tell him.”

“Selene... I’m not sure I can make you that promise. If he attacks you, and we have to interfere—”

“This is not a request. You’re going to let me do this my way.” She locked eyes with Rajini. “I know and understand that you’re Kai’s friend and Beta and that you’ll do anything to help him. But this is for me to tell. And I want to do that in my own time. When I feel like I’m ready for it or when I think Kai is ready to know.”

Rajini sat on her chair in utter silence.

“Promise me, Rajini.”

“I’ll discuss it with Caitlin, and we’ll try to keep it in mind. I won’t make you any promises, though. It’s Caitlin’s call to make, as she’s his healer, not mine. Your safety is our priority, along with Kai’s bloodline.”

Selene gritted her teeth in order to stop herself from screaming at the Beta in front of her. Of course Rajini saw it differently. Every Beta probably did as they always had their priorities on a different level than her. Her unborn child had suddenly become a pack decision, again. And yet... this was her body. Her life. This child was Kai and hers. This had nothing to do with anyone else. Not to forget Kai was her—he wasn’t her anything, she knew that. But he was still the father. “Tell Caitlin that it’s

not her call to make either. It's mine and mine alone. No one says a word to him." The growing child in her belly was hers. They couldn't make that call for her. That was the line she would not let them cross. "You always talk about honesty and trust. Now it's your turn to trust me. Let me do this. I know that you think you're doing your job. But this is my part. This is my job. I'm the mother. Not you. Not Caitlin. *Me*. And I will decide when I tell him." Maybe the Betas meant well, and maybe they thought they were doing their job, but she knew Kai. She knew him in ways they would never know him, no matter how close they all were.

"I—I'll let Caitlin know, but I'm certain she'll want to talk to you about it."

"There's nothing to talk about." She walked out of the dining area before Rajini could say anything else. Her heart hammered in her chest and throat, and she felt a new wave of nausea come up. Her stomach churned and twisted. It happened all the time, and Selene knew why. Caitlin knew it too. With normal couples, the female could rely on the male during the pregnancy through the mating bond they shared, but in her case, she had nothing. She didn't have him to help her. She wasn't even sure whether he'd want to help her. Whether he wanted to mate her, even. Right now, she had absolutely no one.



## HOME

“Kai?”

A touch to his shoulder made Kai jerk, and bile rose in the back of his throat. He tried to recognize whose voice it was. His heartbeat picked up as he fought against the panic clawing at him and leaving him breathless. He clenched his hands tightly, readying himself to attack the person who'd woken him. Pain would follow, he knew. It was always the same. Day after day, pain would come the moment he woke.

The only silver lining to hearing a voice was that he'd been freed from isolation. Feeling or hearing nothing at all was the worst kind of torture. On some days he was certain he would die, to only be cured again so everything could start anew.

He forced himself to take a deep breath and find his wolf in the back of his mind. Every time he woke up, he tried to find his wolf to make sure his other half hadn't forsaken him. A daily routine. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. The people here had blocked his contact with his wolf more than once. The combination of losing his wolf and isolation had nearly driven him to stop fighting. To give into the blackness and never to return again.

He found his wolf almost the same instant, faster than he had done in a very, very long time, and it startled him. His wolf was so close. The animal stirred in his mind, restless but there. His heart calmed down, and his senses spread out, drawing his wolf close to the surface. If he needed to attack now, he had his other half with him, ready to go.

“Kai?”

There it was again, someone saying his name. His nickname. The name his friends used. A soft sound, unlike most other times he had heard it. It was like he knew that voice, like it was familiar. The strangest part of it was that they called him by his name instead of his number or the word ‘dog’. A gentle touch to his right hand made Kai growl low and dangerously in his throat. Whoever it was, they needed to stay the hell away from him. He wasn’t ready to handle more pain. Finally, he opened his eyes and saw the white ceiling. He blinked and tried to cover his eyes with his hands, but they halted after only a few inches. There were straps were around his wrists. He was bound again.

A deeper, more dangerous growl erupted from his chest. Growling had never helped him before, but it was the only thing he could do. Maybe they’d back off for once. He was done screaming his lungs out. And maybe if he stayed quiet and didn’t move, the person speaking would go away. If he tried long enough, they would give up and leave.

“Kai, look at me, please.”

His name was repeated again, and the more he listened, the more familiar it sounded. It wasn’t like his hallucinations; this voice wasn’t hollow like he’d heard before. It was warm, close by, and real. Slowly, he turned his gaze toward the sound and blinked. “Spencer?” He couldn’t believe his eyes. This definitely had to be another figment of his imagination. Kai coughed and swallowed at the rawness in his throat from saying just a name. He couldn’t remember if he’d been injected again with that yellow liquid, but it was the only viable explanation for what he was seeing.

“You’re home,” Spencer said.

He was sitting on a chair next to the bed, but at a distance where Kai wouldn’t be able to get to him, out of reach of his claws and fangs. Kai desperately wanted to believe Spencer. Looking into his best friend’s familiar eyes made Kai want to believe. Going home was all he dreamt off, but deep down, he knew the truth. In a bit, he would jolt awake again, and

he'd be back on that black leathery examination table. Or worse, the isolation cell. Or maybe they'd wake him up with a few lashes on his back.

"Kai?" Spencer leaned forward. "Please, look at me."

His wolf maneuvered closer to the edge of his mind as Kai turned his attention back on the Beta. His irises turned black, and his upper lip drew up in a silent snarl.

"You're home."

Those damn hallucinations would never end. He was caught in an endless loop. He moved his hands again, and the restraints tightened around his wrists. "Get away from me," he said through clenched teeth, his voice raw. Talking hurt, but he had to force the words out. He pulled at the restraints, trying to get away. As always, he couldn't. But he had to get out. He had to get away from here. There had to be a way to get to his friends, so he could warn them about—

"Kai, listen to me," Spencer said with voice steady. "You are home. We got you out. You're safe."

"I said to stay away from me." The words wheezed out of his throat, and he tried kicking his legs in an attempt to get out of the restraints. He tried moving his arms harder, pulling and tugging at the bonds around his wrists. He had to warn them. This was fake. Spencer wasn't in the room with him. He couldn't be, his friends would never tie him down like this. His muscles clenched and protested as he bruised his own skin.

Spencer moved forward. "Kai, you have to listen to me. You're ho—"

"Get away!" Kai's voice bounced off the walls. The sound died out slowly and Spencer stood unmoving. His chest heaved with every breath, but it seemed like Spencer finally understood the message.

"Kai, please—"

"Get out." Kai squeezed his eyes shut in an attempt to drown Spencer out and to focus only on his wolf. Like this, the hallucinations might stop. He'd done it before. He wasn't home. He might never get home again, and getting his hopes up was the worst thing he could do. His friends haunted him day and night, when he was awake, when he was asleep, or

when he'd been injected with that liquid. It was a never-ending cycle, and Kai desperately wanted it to end.

A rustling of clothes told him Spencer was moving away from the bed, and a second later, Kai heard a door open and close.

Slowly, he managed to breath out, and he opened his eyes again, falling back against the bed. His muscles relaxed somewhat. Now he had to get out of here and get home. If only to warn his friends about *her*.