

Awakening Following Fate by L. T. Marshall Chapter 20

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Curled in Colton's arms in bed, my head laid on his chest as I listen to that steady rhythm of his heartbeat, I doze in and out of peaceful and contented slumber. Something keeps waking me when I start to fall deeply, and I can't seem to put my finger on it. Like a dream or a feeling that's just out of sight and seems to jump in to haul me back whenever my consciousness drifts away. An unease or a threatening nightmare maybe, it's definitely a sense of unease and try as I might, I can't seem to fall into blissful darkness for any length of time. It's almost dawn and I have barely dozed for more than twenty-minute slots at a time. I'm frustrated and exhausted, yet I can't seem to rest.

Colton however is completely out cold, wrapped up around me protectively, his face buried in my hair as he silently inhales and exhales so peacefully that it at least brings me a sense of calm. In his preferred position of full-frontal body wedged against my side as I lay on my back, held in his arms and using his bent lower one as a pillow. He seems oblivious to my restlessness and with that flawless smooth expression showing a vulnerable snoozer it at least soothes me a little.

My inner anxiety is swirling, and that strong sense of foreboding is slowly chipping away at my mental state. I just can't figure out why or what it is. The night is quiet, the patrols have reported nothing untoward and the air is just right in temperature for once. It should be a comfortable slumber. I screw my eyes shut tight, knowing that soon the sun will rise, and Colton will get up and the rousing noises of the village will take away this sense of being alone. I will just lay here and hope to catch a few more slots of shut eye before that happens and leaves me shattered all day.

Colton's a way early riser and always likes to patrol the grounds with the changeover of sentinels at first sun, to check, to be sure nothing happened in the night. He seems to survive on bare minimal sleep and yet me, I can never rise before seven nowadays. In fact, even nine is becoming hard. My ability to be as up and on form like he is daily has been dwindling of late and I often wonder if I am getting spoiled and lazy. I want to sleep and curl up in bed way past his leaving me alone and the first thing I want to do is eat with Sierra when I do. It's rare for Colton to stay in bed for any length of time, but he does come back before I wake and usually seduces me into some morning time affection before we stroll for food.

A light catches my attention through my closed lids, glowing insanely close and blue in color and I flicker my eyes open knowing instantly what it is. Colton's hand resting gently on my neck is illuminated in the telltale glow of his gift and I squint at his face to see if there's any hints of distress. My heartbeat upping that he may be having a vision or another of those horrifying dreams he mentioned at breakfast. I reach out to touch his face and hesitate as the glow intensifies to an almost blinding light and I have to screw my eyes closed with the sudden prick of searing pain at its sheer intensity.

He dreams of things sometimes and this is usually the signal if I am awake when he's not. His hands warm my skin as it travels up his wrists and makes his forearms gently glow too before fading out before it reaches his upper arm. His hands enveloped in an azure bright orb that lights the whole room, yet he's still motionless and I wonder if this really is the dream he says he keeps having. He seems calm and motionless, expression still and youthful and not at all like he's having a nightmare. I know how much it distresses him if it is and I don't want it to progress, so I gently touch his face with my fingertips, across his cheek softly to rouse him from the deepest part of sleep.

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"Colton..... wake up." Whispering, I try and stir him out of his state of vision, but he only opens his eyes impulsively, blinding blue glow like neon tube lights making me squint and stares blankly through me. His body responding to me, but his mind fully submerged in wherever he is. He is most definitely not awake, and his focus is on nothing out here with me. No depth, only blank and rigid and disconnected from reality.

He still hasn't decided if this gift is a curse or something positive as he's yet to find the use beyond disturbing dreams. He likes the fact he's learning to heal ailments and wounds with a touch and it in itself has great advantages, especially to the children who come to the med bay with scr***s and bumps. He healed a broken wrist in a three-year-old a few days ago so he's definitely getting stronger in his ability to do it. Yet the dreams, the visions, he abhors the vagueness and the sporadic nature of them.

He's motionless as I lay, surrounded by eerie light which casts shadows in the furniture around us, lighting up only parts of the room and the rest falls into odd shadow. It feels like a surreal fairy room and a little ethereal, reminding me of my memories of Sierra when she came to me as a child. If I wasn't lying next to him them it would be kind of freaky and most certainly unnerving.

Colton gives me a heart attack by gasping out loudly as though suddenly taking a breath, grasping my face with an impulsive jump reaction and I flinch with a small yelp; so not ready for any kind pf physical response. My stomach lurches up into my chest and my heart misses a beat as I hit a cold sweat with the sudden fright he gave me. His eyes widen as the glow intensifies and then he blinks, seemingly coming to and brown eyes are restored almost instantly as he registers the fact I am wide eyed staring at him like a scared little rabbit.

He blinks again, subtly shakes his head as though to clear a dream fog away, seems to fully wake up, rubs his face, and takes a second to realize I am still staring at him in the now darkness again, as his nocturnal vision kicks in. A frown coming over him and a second of pause while he inhales.

"We need to get up!" he commands, darting upwards and giving me no clue as to why, or a second to pull my swirling emotions back to calm. His whole mood sends me into anxiety overload, as he shoots immediately into panicked concern and out of bed in a flash, grabbing the nearest clothes he has and throws them on, turning to me hurriedly. His rushed ambience, the deathly fear seeping my way, all pull my senses to high alert and my own heart starts racing.

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"Baby, up, move ... Now! It's Tawna!" Colton doesn't wait for me, he turns as soon as he's dressed and takes off at hyper speed and I don't hesitate to do the same, grabbing a robe to cover my sheer nightdress and throw it on as I follow him at speed. Nerves strung out, head dazed with confusion but I know him well enough to not argue. He saw something and he's acting on it and I should follow because he told me to.

He's already down and outside and am*** the outer ground patrol, issuing orders to wake the reserve patrols immediately. His tone is harsh, his voice low and husky from residue sleep and something else; an underlying edge that sounds like he's almost in freak out mode. A sense of urgency in the air as he rallies every one of our strongest and I catch his arm as he paces past me to direct more wolves coming in from the west tree line at his command.

"What's going on?" Colton's scaring me with the intensity of his panic, and he screws his eyes shut for a moment, turning silent and then blinks them open at me. I see the sheer devastation in the depths, and it makes me catch my breath as cold sweeps through my body. A shiver that something really bad is happening as my eyes mist over of their own accord and I'm instantly sick with gurgling worry.

"Carmen's on her way down... her mom isn't where she should be. I dreamt..... I saw her. She ran. Out there..." Colton turns and points into the densest part of the forest, the direction that most of our vamp attacks come from, the path to imminent danger for a loan wolf in the dark. His face falls somber, paling out as the last of his color seems to drain away and I gasp as what he says sinks in.

"Oh my god, it's still dark, she doesn't know about the boundary or the fact they lurk out there waiting for us. Colton what is she doing?" My own tone reaches high pitch hysteria as my stomach clenches in fear. I gaze out into the darkness and scrunch my eyes closed tight in a bid to exert my Luna link. Instinct taking over to shield one of my pack in anyway I can.

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Tawna, if you can hear me, then come back, come home to your pack. It's not safe out there.

I home in on Tawna's image in the hopes it reaches her mind link but it's not something I do often as Colton is so much better at pack linking. Colton stares at me for a second, obviously he heard me, as my mate he can sometimes tap into my mind links involuntarily when we're this close in contact.

Tawna, I command you to turn around and head back to the homestead and safety. Right now. Colton alpha tones her, cutting into my head and taking over himself, sending out the link and I cross my fingers in hopes that she hears this. No wolf can deny or resist the alpha tone. It's the whole point. To command

unruly or defiant in your pack against their will so you can regain order and control. She can't disobey him if she hears him.

"Do you think it will work? What if she closed her link off so nothing gets in?" my questions are quieted by the shrill voice that comes at us from the open homestead door. A familiar haughty tone only it's pitched in terror and higher than normal and I flinch at his appearance.

"Where is she?..... I couldn't find her.... She's not in her room, or in the house. Colton why did you tell me to come down here?... Do you know where she is?" Carmen is already in a state of hysteria, tears streaming down her face, not seeming to care who sees them and we are blinded by the sudden illumination of the whole front sweeping drive and tree line as guards switch on our floodlighting. The patrols are streaming in from the village, the homestead, and every nook and cranny around as they gather together as a thrown together chaotic search party.

I move to Carmen at the door in a flash, instinctively going to her, and pull her into my arms, wiping her face and shooshing her as I cradle her in a hug. She doesn't fight me, her body is trembling, her attention fully on the void of her mother's presence and she let's me hold her up without any kind of resistance. Her body is cold, her posture is weak, and her eyes are fixed on Colton as though begging him for answers that she knows he doesn't have.

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"We're going to find her.... Try and be calm. Let us get out there and look. She can't have gotten far." I soothe with a gentle tone holding her as best I can even though she doesn't hug me back. Carmen sags in my hold and seems to crumble completely, turning to a whimper as the tears fall freely.

"I knew.... deep down, I knew she would try this."

assembled are all of our strongest males, and a few femmes, the sub pack too as they come in from the forest where they had been out walking the perimeter before dawn.

"We didn't see her leave, are you sure, Cole?" Meadow interrupts as she strolls into the center of the group and stands by Colton's side. Straight to command mode and all emotion pushed aside when she has a task. Colton nods and taps his head as if to tell her he had a vision and Meadows face pales out much the same way his did. I can tell he's linking her with details and her expression says it all.

"Okay, I'll take three of our sub packs and spread on the left and backside of the stead, you take the rest and spread right and front. Even if you know which direction she took, she might have veered..... or..." She doesn't add 'has been chased' to the end, glancing at Carmen warily and then looking away fast as she waves her hand at the nearest wolves. They jump to attention and silently rally to whatever command her hand gesture gave.

Colton pats Meadow on the back as if in agreement and then turns and links the several packs he's choosing for his own search party via the open pack link, so we all hear him. This is urgent and he's wasting no time and no number of bodies. He's rallying all who are capable, and I know it's because he fears time is of the essence. They split almost instantly as half the crowd moves with Meds and the rest with Colton and they all fan out and head into the woods at hyper speed.

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"Come on. Let's stick with Colton and we'll help. More eyes." I brush Carmen's hair back and release her from my hold, instead taking her hand and pull her with me out into the clearing. She lets me guide her like a vulnerable child needing guidance, and for a moment I wonder if this is the same girl from earlier, the same Carmen who doesn't show weakness. I shove it out of my head, focus on being her rock and speed to catch up with Colton.

As I have no shoes on I have to turn my feet to wolf to save myself from injury and ignore the fact I'm out here in a silk dress and a short towel robe, while everyone else is fully dressed. It doesn't really matter I guess, given any hint of danger I'll shred these with a turn so it's probably a blessing I didn't get dressed. We lose too many clothes that way.

We catch up with Colton just inside the perimeter of the frequency border and he halts, sensing us behind him and turns to me. His eyes amber glowing, his claws already engaged in case we hit trouble. He looks wild, poised to fight, and yet I still can't shake seeing that deep fear in the depths of his beautiful eyes under furrowed brows and stress lines etched on his face. He thinks we're not going to get to her in time and I can feel it in his emotions.

"Stay right with me. No more than four feet away, okay? No matter what. We're fanning out six feet apart and walking a wave around the wholestead... We'll find her, we have to... Sun isn't up for an hour yet, it's not safe here." Colton beckons us with hushed tones and turns to lead the way as we join the search. His head fully engaged in the task and taking control like the Alpha I love. I seem to be the only one who recognizes he's not as confident and assured as he seems, that his aura is bleeding, and he's genuinely is afraid of what we might find out here.

Even at speed, the pack moving as one swift line, checking every fallen log, cave, nook and cranny, and heading further into the deep dark forest, we still see no sign of her, and I start to wonder if she's really out here. Glancing from wolves in the trees around us, to the back of Colton's strong body as we push on beyond our safety net of the frequency and shudder as another wave of revulsion overtakes me.

This is the third time since walking beyond the line, that a deep well of nausea and cringe consumes me wholly, and this time I gasp inwardly as I am s***er punched low down at a strange smell that makes me giddy with memories. The almost stinging, astringent whiff of something awful yet outwith my grasp of memory as a familiar thing. My eyes water with the intensity of it's odor and I have to pull myself stiff to stop my body from crumbling as I stagger over a fallen log. It's like the smell alone has hit some deep unwanted thought and made my

body react like I'm in trauma. I feel weak instantly, my limbs loosening as dizziness moves in and I become aware that I have let go of Carmen fully.

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Colton? I blanch and mind link via our mate bond only, the fear rippling over my spine as I figure out what the strong metallic and awful smell is that's engorging my senses and leaving me hyper aware as one sickly vision clouds my sight. A dark terrifying night when I was clinging onto life by a thread and all the people, everyone I had known, were ripped to shreds around me. I almost vomit with the return of that scene in my mind's eye, my body shuddering in revulsion and pain as my broken heart rips at old scars and tears well up in my eyes.

Wolf blood smells different to most other things in nature, and dead wolf is the most unique of all. It's like the second our life essence drains it leaves the red fluid rancid and potent so no animals will come and try to feast on remains. It's the smell of death, of repulsion and awful things, from the night of the courtyard when vampires almost killed me.

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I smell it. Stay here. Keep Carmen back. Colton doesn't turn to look at me but acts like nothing is wrong and wades further forward increasing his speed, so he flips out of sight in a blink. I pause, grabbing at her arm and finding her palm with my own to bring us back together to la**o her to me. I yank her back to my side a little aggressively in a bid to shield her from what she's about to find.

"Colton told us to stay." I fix my gaze on her, tone commanding so she knows not to argue, aware of the movement around us and my body bristling with tension as I keep searching for hints of vamps in the forest. My senses are tuned in but I feel nothing of close presence, which is weird for them. Given what smell lingers around us, I can't understand why there's no lingering scent of our enemy with it.

We're really far from the stead, out in the densest area before it starts going uphill towards the mountain and yet not a single vampire has stuck around. They obviously did this to her recently, so why are they not still here?

"No!.... He would only tell us to What's that smell?" Carmen breaks into my thoughts with her return of b****y tone, she's emotionally all over the place and seems to be back in abrasive, don't touch me mode. Her fear and angst intermingled, hysteria curbing the horizon and it's obvious she's never smelled dead wolf before. It's not common I guess, given our ability to stay alive, and few who never went to battle have smelled it. Once you do though, you never forget.

Carmen starts tugging at my hand impatiently to get free, sensing something off with his sudden departure, as Colton disappears from view completely into the thicket with surrounding sentinels. I note that several wolves along our line have

halted too, to guard us, staying close enough to fill the gaps that have been left by Colton taking pack with him.

Colton leaving us safe. Always thinking of protecting his mate even if he knows I have abilities to protect myself.

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"He knows something, he's found something, hasn't he? ..." Carmen spins on me, her eyes red rimmed with tears, her appearance haggard, yet her tone is fierce and daunting, and her eyes are glowing bright orange. Without warning she yanks her hand hard out of mine and takes off in the blink of an eye in the direction Colton went before I can react. Instinctively I lift my hands and try and grasp her with my power, to stop her leaving me, but she dodges between trees and instead I manage to yank the tree backwards with a little too much force so it's almost uprooted.

"s***!" I curse out into the eerie quiet and throw my hair back as decision overtakes me. I take off after her

Colton, Carmen got free, she's heading to you. I link him in warning and curse under my breath as I speed to catch up, panic overtaking me. Not only for her, but what I might see. I have never shaken the memory of that night from my memory bank and despite being on the battlefield and killing vamps these past months, I'm not exactly okay with death and bloodshed.

I follow the scent of my mate and run smack bang into the back of Carmen's halted form only twenty yards into the bush and have to sidestep her at the very last second to avoid hitting her full pelt to see why she's stopped. The sight brings me to a frozen halt and my brain blanks out as my eyes widen in silent horror.

Colton is kneeling by what looks like the ripped up remains of an animal, the ground drenched in dark red, thick fluid, and pieces of unidentifiable gristle, meat and bones are shredded across a ten foot area like someone blew up a cow. The smell is at an all-time high here and the scraps of fabric and hair am*** the debris, caught up on bushes and leaves send my stomach into an instant upchuck motion. I have to swallow down hard to curb the urge to vomit as realization hits me hard in the chest and I struggle to breathe. Colton turns, catching sight of us and jumps to his feet before Carmen reacts. It all happens so fast, only second of time but to me it feels like endless minutes.

It takes Carmen a second to release the torn up animal is wearing shreds of her mother's dress and she erupts in an almighty scream that shakes the trees and drops every wolf around us to their knees. Even me, as blinding pain a**aults my every sense and nerve and I crumble under the sheer power of a high-pitched, blazing, searing agony, shooting through my head and limbs. Covering our ears as Carmen a**aults us with her powerful ability and her sheer heartbreak makes it more potent than I knew she was capable of. I cover my head, shuddering in terror that my brain may self-implode and sag with relief when Colton's sharp alpha tone hushes her a**ault.

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“Carmen, stop screaming!” he commands harshly, and the instant relief leaves my ears ringing, my brain stuttering, and my body shivering as though I have been electrocuted with high voltage right on the temples. Carmen moves fast, heading straight for the devastation, screaming out ‘Mom’ as she runs at the mess around the ground before him. Her hysteria breaking loose and she’s no longer that mask wearing girl, but a blubbing mess of despair.

Colton counteracts her fast. Dashing in front of her and catching her, hauling her backwards with a few strides to keep her away from the worst of what I can see. He pulls her to him fluidly, cradling her in his arms to keep her tight and pushes her face into his chest so she can’t see the devastation of what’s left of her mother. What those creatures did to her.

“Mom... MOM! ... MOM!!!” Carmen breaks completely, wailing, sobbing, screeching with a broken voice which turns to howls as both her human and wolf battle for dominance in their anguish. Fighting him, wriggling wildly to break free and go to her, even though there’s nothing there to hold anymore. It’s the most distressing thing I have ever witnessed as I watch her fall apart in my mate’s arms.

He struggles to keep her, gripping her in a way that should make me jealous because of how intimately he’s trying to control her, but it doesn’t. My own overwhelming sadness and despair rationalizes why he has to and why it’s the only thing he can do in this moment. My Luna heart kicking in to bleed for the loss of one of our own, and the deep sympathy for the heartbreak of another.

Despite his strength, he’s struggling to keep her tied to him and has to force her down to her knees with him so he can gain better control of holding her in a hug. He locks eyes on me, his own shining with unshed tears that literally rip my heart to shreds and I cough as I choke with sudden sobs that escape of their own accord. Wracked with heartbreak of my own.

I know he feels like somehow, he did this, it’s his fault, that he failed as Alpha to protect Tawna, but I can only shake my head at him as my own warm tears roll chaotically over my cold cheeks and the air around us falls deathly still. I only feel an ounce of the pain I know Carmen is spewing out in the air around me and it’s enough to almost suffocate me. It’s unbearable and I can only stand here and stare at them, frozen still where I stand and unable to move because I don’t know what else to do.

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Carmen claws at Colton’s chest and arms weakly, to let her free, without any real fight anymore, and ends up crumbling in his arms hopelessly as her body gives up. Finally, on her knees as Colton sinks over her, from restraint to cuddling as her body slumps into a disheveled heap and seems to slide through his hold like water as her limbs dissolve. Refusing to relent and let her go and leave her in the heap on the forest floor where she comes to be quieter and broken. He moves over her protectively, holding her shoulders and upper body as her face lands in

his lap and she curls into a tiny ball like a small child would after a traumatic nightmare.

“Why?... Why would she.....? She left me....” Her broken tiny whimpers barely graze the air, but I hear them, and they cut me like a knife to the heart and stomach. I cover my face to wipe away the onslaught of wet waves overtaking my skin and blink at the pitiful sight of her, avoiding looking beyond at the carnage and pushing the scent out of my nostrils. Wolves around us move in and lower their heads as many begin to shed tears for their fallen kin, and the air is filled with a sadness that destroys what’s left of my sanity. A low howl begins nearby and extends to join a mournful chorus that echoes in the air around us, spreading far beyond into the forest and back towards the stead as the wolves let out their own sorrow at being too late. The sound is enough to make me crumble to my own knees and cry painfully, hugging my own body with my arms.

“Carmen, I’m sorry.... I’m so sorry.” Colton tries to hush her, his voice breaking as his own tears fall freely and drop over her lowered head like gentle raindrops. He’s stroking her hair and squeezing her tight as I stare in numb disbelief at what we failed to stop from happening, carrying the heavy weight of guilt in my heart that my mate is already bearing.

I don’t know how to fix this.

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Vampires did this and left her here in hopes we found her. The blood is fresh, I can smell it, the kill is still warm, and I can still feel the traces of her heat and her scent around me as though her soul still lingers. Feel the ebbing away of her emotions and fears in the air around us because they are still so recent and my gift homes in, tortured by what I can feel. They knew we were looking for her and yet they waited until we were close enough to kill her completely and I don’t understand why.

Was this a game to them? It feels like they were luring us out here this far for fun and I look around trying to sense if this might be a trap with so many of our kind out here, but there’s nothing. The vamps have retreated and gone and only the chaos they have caused is left behind in the air around us. No hint or traces that they are close in anyway and not even the feeling of eyes observing.

“Meadow... take Carmen and Lorey back to the house. They don’t need to be here for this.” Colton yanks my focus back to him as he instructs, and Meadow appears behind me like a sudden shadow. I note that all the other packs are now flooding in to where we are, so we’re grouped as one unit once more. Obviously Colton linked them, and Carmen’s scream brought them zoning right in. Colton has lifted up to pull the trembling figure with him to their feet and I look away quickly as he hauls her into another hug soothingly and let’s her weight rest against him. That stirring of dislike growing like a warm ember in my belly even

though I know he's only being compa**ionate. He's being the Alpha, and this is no time for feeling threatened.

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"Come on you." Meadow leans in to take charge of Carmen in Colton's arms and I realize tears are still washing down my face as I stare at them again in stupefaction. Cooling my skin as the air turns them from warm to icy cold. Hating myself that I feel inner warm relief when she's taken from my mate's embrace and blush with shame at my own selfishness. I'm so stupidly possessive of him sometimes that it's not admirable.

The shock of what we have in front of us comes back into view as I stare in the direction of chaos and it pushes my own emotions to quiet as Meadow guides Carmen past me. She seems to snap at the sudden release of his arms and makes a dart for the remains of body once more in blind hysteria. A painful sob escaping her lips, but this time I am faster and she's closer to me than him. Meadow is startled by her sudden change of direction so that she loses grip for a second and I flash my hand up, catching her in the air, holding her steady and pulling her around, lifting her from her feet and back towards me. As soft as air and making her fly with my ability.

My gift never fails me, and I glide her to my side and hold her there as she gently meets ground once more, wide eyed and still after what I just did to her. The shock silences her completely and I release her once Meadow gets a grip on her hand and wrist in a way that signals she won't get loose a second time

"Carmen go home with Meadow." Colton alpha tones her again, leaving no room for a second error and she reluctantly turns on her heel. Her skin white and damp, her eyes empty and blurred and her whole body sags with sheer misery. Her whole aura is that of grief.

"Lorey... come here, baby." Colton moves to me, bringing my attention back to him as he pulls me into his arms and nuzzles me close. With one moment of attentive affection, he wipes away my brewing green eyed monster and gives me the kind of hug that no one else gets. The 'I need you' embrace that sweeps me up into him and holds me tighter than he held her, while burying his face in the crook of my neck. Warming my skin with his deep exhale before pulling up to look me in the eye again. I melt like liquid with his touch and allow him to wipe away my tears with gentle fingers. I can feel his own despair at what has happened, and it weighs on me heavily. "We need to bury her. We can't leave her like this. Go home and wait for me there, where it's safe, and warm, and see if you can help her... somehow. I don't even know how. You've been through the loss of your mother, maybe you can ..." Colton trails off at a loss, squeezes me tight, kisses me softly and wipes away the rest of my tears for me as I hug him back. Aware that most of the wolves are now moving in to see what's been done and a couple rush to the bushes to vomit. Not all wolves can stomach things like this, and I'm actually shocked that I am not one who had to throw up on smelling and seeing this. Maybe these months and what happened before have numbed a part of me more than I gave it credit for.

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"I love you." I breathe hastily, that inner insecurity peeking out at me because I am sometimes still that unworthy girl he rejected. I give him a second kiss, more of a grazing of lips and he nestles his forehead to mine in the way he does when he's trying to reassure me. Maybe this time he needs me to ground him, his emotions are definitely on the needier and cast loose side than mine are.

"I can't believe I let this happen. I feel like I failed her..... Sun's coming, so we can do this right and lay her to rest. I owe it to Carmen and her mom to treat her with the respect of the pack..... Take two wolves as guards and go catch Meadow and get home. Don't hang around, especially not this far outside the borders. I don't want you around this or helping. You shouldn't be near this... I love you, baby. Go home for me." He sighs heavily and tightens his arms around me once more, craving me yet needing me to leave him for now. I can feel his conflicted feelings and make it easier by letting him go with a nod.

Colton lets me loose and nods to two guards who appear beside me in the now dim and less dark light. I note he's sending the two who threw up, sensing neither will be any good at helping with what he has to do. They stand patiently and obediently wait for me to move.

"With many wolves digging it should be fast and then...." He sighs knowing he has to somehow get that mess buried in some kind of respectful way and I nod, knowing what he's thinking. I don't envy the task of clearing this up and putting every piece of her and her blood in the ground to honor our ways. He may have to scorch the landscape and burn the surrounding landscape to properly send her soul to the fates.

Taking one last much needed hug to try and calm my distraught heart I turn on my heel to go but pause a second. Knowing I should catch up and stay close to Meadow, even if my powers make me more capable than most wolves but something crosses my mind.

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"I'll ask the Shaman to start preparing a ceremony. Help Carmen with closure and allow her time to grieve. Give the pack a proper funeral service to grieve a kin member..... Tawna's mate?" I ask absentmindedly, knowing that Carmen maybe needs to grieve two parents and not one and we should give her that, even if he's not someone we should remember. Colton's face tenses and he signals yes with the slightest of head movements that makes my heart sink even further.

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"Dead, the second her heart ceased to beat. My dad will be in chaos on the mountain too as he just lost his second in command. Her death wasn't for nothing but.... I would rather her here with us, than my father losing some control. Ask the Shaman to mention them both, but only honor Tawna. This is for her, not them." Colton's eyes are filled with unshed tears once more and I can only bite on

my lip and agree with a nod, again crying softly despite the overwhelming empty and numb coursing through my veins. All of this just feels so overwhelmingly awful that my brain can't process sit at all. There's a dark heaviness taking over me that I know is sadness and I can barely breathe. I can't imagine how Carmen feels right now.

"Stay safe, don't be long." I add in haste, one last glimpse of his disheveled face and take off after Meadow with my two guards in tow, making light of the distance in hyper speed. I try and focus on doing rather than feeling and aim to catch up.

I won't be. I'll follow once this done. Stay safe, Baby. Knowing your home will make me feel better about being here. Colton's voice follows me and in such a short time I manage to catch up to Meadow running with Carmen, although not at full speed as Carmen seems to be struggling to pull herself together. I slow as I get to them and pull up on the free side of Carmen's sagging posture, pulling her arm into mine and holding her up a little. Her body is icy cold, giving off a wave of devastation around her and she doesn't even flinch at my touch.

She's sobbing, staring blankly ahead as her feet stumble over debris she isn't trying to avoid, and Meadow is struggling to keep her on her feet, casting a glance at me that says 'she's a mess'. Overwhelming empathy runs over me, both from her and my own internal emotion piping up at the sorrowful state of Carmen. I wish she didn't see what she saw and I don't blame Colton for tackling her and holding her tight. No one needs to see someone they love end that way and it will forever haunt her. Knowing her mom's last moments were in terror and agony and untold suffering before she took her last breath.

What are we going to do with her when we get her home? Meadow breaks into my thoughts in a private link and I try and sort my own emotions from the two invading next to me. Carmen's despair is so strong I'm finding it hard to keep my own logic and mind straight.

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Take her to the med bay, maybe Doc Maigo can give her something to relax her and make her calm down, I don't know. The homestead looms into sight and the rustle behind us of the following guards alerts me that they are still close and keeping watch over us. I turn and glimpse over my shoulder as I feel the physical change in the air of us crossing the frequency boundaries and the static sizzle of safety that means we no longer need a**istance. We're safe.

"Go back and help. We don't need you now. More hands make swifter work. Sun isn't up yet and there are dangers for our pack out there." I order and get two unquestioned nods as both males turn and take off back towards my mate and my people in a gust of breeze as they hyper speed away.

Meadow gets tired of dragging Carmen and stops to hoist her over her shoulder in an unresisted maneuver and frees our clumsy deadweight. She takes off in front of me at speed and I follow, running and skipping through the last half mile of forest floor and fallen trees until we end up on the illuminated gravel drive. More wolves are out here, some of the less capable sentinel guards which were

left behind, so the house was not completely unprotected, and some from the village have ventured out to find out what's going on. Mostly concerned males worried their families are in danger because news spread fast that most of the capable had spread into the woods to chase Tawna.

"Everything is okay.... Go back to your homes and we will call a meeting for the whole village before noon. To explain. The pack will be home shortly and there's no need to worry about them, sun's coming, and all is quiet now." I announce as loudly as I can before following Meadow indoors and we head straight for the sick room. I know those who heard me will pass the message on and I hope it brings some calm back to those left behind.

We have twenty-four seven staff in our medical bay because we never know when we may need it so I am relieved to see the Doctor and a nurse coming to Meadow's aid. Since moving here to damper air, the children have been getting sick sometimes, and with playful fearless wolf cubs, they injure themselves frequently.

Carmen has stopped fighting at all, in any kind of way and seems to have ceased responding emotionally. Silent, numb, and staring at nothing as she's manhandled like a wet rag and does nothing to stop us. It's like her mind has left the building and all that's left is a broken empty shell of shock and I wonder if life finally played that last hand at her that snapped what was left of her mental strength.

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I walk behind Meadow; Carmen's body is limp, her face partially concealed by her masses of blonde hair but there's a heavy ambience of surreal calm because she is so motionless. Her sobbing has stopped and it's like all her energy is gone. She's defeated and broken and despite our past I have never felt so much sorrow and pain for anyone as I do in this moment. Maybe it's because I know what it's like to lose your parents in one fell swoop, your whole family, when they were all you have. Maybe it's because I too witnessed the horrifying death by vampire of my home family of rejects and still live with the memory of their blood and bodies scattered across the ground, much like we found Tawna. Either way, my heart pangs for the girl before me and I internally cry for her pain.

Vampires are ruthless and brutal killers. They leave mess and chaos and rip their victims to shreds when the frenzy to feed takes them. In the case of wolves, they can't drink too much of our blood or it kills them, and it somehow makes the murder more violent. They tend to leave nothing but remains spread across the countryside when they battle our kind. An act of violence purely because they hate our kind.

"Luna Alora, it's my pleasure. How may I assist." The doctor gracefully moves towards Meadow who is rolling Carmen from her shoulder onto the bed and flops her back against cushions. Carmen has no fight in her, her skin ashen and her eyes are red rimmed yet lifeless as she continues to silently gaze into the air. Her mind somewhere far away. Tears roll down her pale cheeks sorrowfully as the warm voice smooths over her, showing a hint of acknowledgement she hears her, but

she stares at the ceiling regardless. I gesture the doctor aside and pull her close with a hushed tone.

"Her mother was killed in the forest by vampires tonight.... she saw the remains..... it was traumatizing. Both her parents are now dead. She needs emotional help to get through the shock and despair tonight until this sinks in and she's more able to process what's happened." My voice trembles as I push the memory aside and focus on the task at hand.

"I'll sedate her for now. Let her sleep, as it might be the last she gets for some time when she wakes up. I'm so sorry." The doctor is one of our gentler femmes, with compassion and a big heart. She trained with humans in a medical university and learned a lot about mental health and ways to deal with human reactions to certain things. Death to wolves is not as normal as humans, so our grieving can be completely horrific when we do lose someone we love. I guess that's the downside to being almost unkillable and having long life spans.

Awakening Following Fate by L. T. Marshall Chapter 25

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The doctor moves aside as Meadow comes to my side and they switch places. The doctor checking over Carmen and wiping her tears away as she checks her pulse, and temperature and generally looks her over. Meadow sighs heavily and casts me an intense look that translates to 'I feel helpless, I wish I could do something'. Despite her history with Carmen, Meadow is still a caring wolf and wouldn't wish this on anyone, even her. I nod knowing this is exactly how I feel, and I gesture her further from the bed in a bid to give them space to let the Doctor do what she needs to do.

"Doc is going to let her sleep; we should take it in turns to sit by her until she's more with it. I'll ask Sierra too, maybe for a few days we can rotate and switch out femmes to comfort and support her. So she's not alone." I don't know what else to do as I was so young and surrounded by grief when I lost my own family that it was completely different. We have been at peace for years so the horror of losing our people isn't as numbed out as it was a decade ago. I have no experience of how to comfort someone else in this way when I was never comforted in any kind of way at all.

"Luna Alora, Luna Alora!" A wolf bursts into the med bay startling us out of our huddled somber and makes me jump with the speed and urgency in which he shot in. We spin on him, glaring to pipe down seeing as he startled the crap out of everyone.

"What is it?" I ask in a harsh tone, hating how panicked he looks and the raised high pitch of a distressed tone coming through his words. My stomach churning in unease at this interruption and my gut instantly tells me something is off.

"Come quickly, there's something ... in the air." He throws his hands up, look somewhat confused and beckons us.

“What?” Meadow and I exchange glances and follow him at speed, leaving Carmen with the doctor and her capable care and speed outside to the main entranceway of the drive to see what he’s talking about.

Sure enough, just like he said there’s some sort of green smog in the air in the far distance of the mountain, which seems to be rolling down and into the forest at great speed like a heavy blanket sliding over the landscape. It’s like smoke, or a dense cloud and the rate it’s moving is alarmingly fast and swallowing all things in sight wherever it slides.

Colton something is coming towards the pack.... a fog. Get back here NOW!! I link rapidly, in panic and fear, reaching out to my mate in case he hasn’t looked up and seen it heading his way. I don’t know what it is, but all my senses are telling me they should get the hell away from it and get back here to safety behind the rune border.

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“What the hell is that, Chica?” Meadow stares at the same thing I am fixated on and we watch in horror as it splays out and spreads sideways through the forest, expanding as it travels and encompassing everything as it moves. It seems to extend and move widthways until it starts to curve around the homestead at a distance and still continues to head this way. It seems to be growing larger and denser and picking up speed.

We see it, we’re moving. It’s fast as hell and almost here. I have them heading back. Colton quiets some of my anxiety by responding and I will him to get here. Whatever it is it’s not natural and the way it came down from the mountain raises all kinds of alarms. We long ago figured the vamps use the mountain to stay close enough to mount attacks, maybe have tunneled inwards, and they definitely use it as a vantage point to look over the lands surrounding. We know they have witches, and I don’t like whatever this is, even if it might be nothing more than a harmless strange colored fog.

Colton it’s spreading. It’s taking over the forest and circling us. My mind link doesn’t hide the panic in my voice, and it wobble uncontrollably, my heart racing as all I can do is watch this monster smog eat our landscape so effortlessly.

Stay in the homestead boundary. It may be a way to let the vamps move in daylight now the suns coming up. Stay behind the runes. We’re coming.

I grab Meadow’s hand in a tight grip as we watch and I can tell by her fixated gaze on the fog she’s linking Cesar, checking on her mate as it moves at us with deadly haste. It feels like an eternity and not the few seconds it’s been in reality. Both poised, numbly quiet and just waiting.

Where are you now? Colton, how far?

I tap my foot on the ground, aware my feet are human again, naked, and I’m standing on gravel but oblivious to the pain. My only focus is them, my heart and soul out there who needs to come to me so I can be sure he’s safe.

Not far, it's almost.....

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I wait for him to finish his sentence then glance at Meadow again as nothing comes. She screws up her face indicating something is up with her link to Cesar too. I can feel it between us, the swirling rise of concern and panic as we both wait out this endless silence.

Colton? What were you trying to say. I ask, waiting patiently but no response at all comes through the link. Instead, an eerie solitude that I haven't experienced for a long time, not since Colton cut me off many moons ago when he rejected me swirls around me. It starts to dredge up my inner anxiety with a fury as I pull at my mind to make the connection but feel like I'm facing a blank dark wall. Meadow moves forward and she stares at the tree line, seemingly trying to concentrate real hard and I realize she maybe too has lost her link to Cesar. This is not a coincidence.

"He's not responding anymore." I point out, distress rising in my throat and I watch as she moves as far to the edge of the trees as she dares. Her face stiff, her eyes wild and dampening by the second as hysteria rises in her and points ahead suddenly with a shaking finger.

"I think I can see them in the woods..... moving fast but the fog it's with them, all around them."

I move beside her, my heart lurching into my throat and stare as far as I can see into the woods and strain to distinguish in the dim light of dawn. The woods are dense but she's right and I spot dark shadows in semi wolf form hammering this way like lightning and sigh with relief. Exhaling heavily as my body loosens lightly and I almost laugh as emotions swirl and cave in indescribable joy.

"Maybe the fog stops the gifts, like the frequency does?" I point out and Meadow shakes her head and points out into the shadows.

"I could have sworn some are turned and in wolf form so surely that means their gifts are fine. We need to get closer to the boundary, something is stopping them from getting closer, it's been too long.... look, they haven't come nearer." I stop my inward rejoicing and turn and look where she's gazing to see for myself that she's right. Despite being close enough to leap home in under a second, they aren't appearing beyond the rune border but instead seem to be lingering on the other side of it. I move beside her and nudge her.

"We don't need to. Here." I lift my hands, flattening them palm to palm and point forwards as though slicing into the forest and slowly move them apart, splitting the trees and pushing foliage and branches back with my gift. Clearing a passage of sight so we can view all the way to the border of the boundary. A tunnel of unrestricted vision where I can see the fog has met the border and seems to be rolling up into the invisible protective wall and climbing higher to get past it. It's smothering all beyond in a dense haze which makes it hard to really see anything.

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Sierra's family magic is keeping it back but it's completely clouding our wolves from sight with the thick fog and we can't see any of them coming our way.

"Why aren't they coming?" I ask numbly, fear slowly dwindling around me once more and I know if Colton could link me, he would. He isn't able to. We have a break in communication because whatever that stuff is it's doing something to keep them out there.

"I have to go look; I can't leave them out there in this with no contact." Meadow's voice breaks, her tears becoming evident as she loses the will to hold them in anymore, her own emotions stifling me. Her love for her mate and her pack reigning supreme and I can't argue with her. My need to know Colton and my pack are okay overwhelms me too, and I walk past her, against Colton's wishes, and head to the tunnel I am still holding apart. Meadow follows without question, without hesitation, both holding our breath in anticipation and we carefully, slowly, walk the long distance until we come almost level with the smog.

"Look" Meadow points up and we see from this angle how it's risen more than thirty feet up, still blocked by our protective barrier and doesn't seem to be able to climb any higher. Instead, it's travelling the entire perimeter of the boundary, spreading, and looking back I see it's far behind the other side of the homestead at an equal distance. Surrounding us on all sides and leveling itself off, but it can't pass the rune border and it's still too dense to make out the pack out there among the trees.

For the time being, we're cut off, with no links, no visual and I stand here motionless unsure what we are meant to do.