

Awakening Following Fate by L. T. Marshall Chapter 71

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I missed the journey home, thankfully. Not by intention, but because my body just passed out on me without my having a say on the matter. I intended to lay on the bed near Carmen for a while, in case she needed to talk to someone, give her some support for something I've experienced too. Somehow sleep took over and the last memory I had was gazing at her lonely figure across from me. Last night's tension, the camping out in the open air, and no real shut eye, all the emotional heaviness of the past few days just kicked my ass, and my maybe the growing lives inside of me too. The next thing I know I'm waking to subtle thuds on the truck walls and jump awake, startled by the rattle as though something is caving in through the roof over my head.

Carmen is sat up on the other bed, her knees pulled into her chest, looking like she too slept the whole time and didn't switch places with Meadow to drive at any point. She seems to be staring blankly at the back window, her expression blank, her face pale from dried tears and showing nothing of any kind of emotion. I turn to, to follow her gaze and see the fog, thinned out across the glass, and containing the dark figures of wolves once again trying to get in with running jumps. I realize we're back at the homestead already, the banging is the second wave of the wolves attacking our truck, so I slept for more than seven hours straight.

"Nothing's changed here then." I point out with a deflated tone, flinching with every new thud over us and Carmen silently shakes her head. All her energy and vigor is gone, and she just seems lifeless and empty. Her mood is like a dense smoke in itself and holds only sadness and melancholy. I wonder how many tears she shed before her emotional exhaustion knocked her out and can do nothing to console her.

I glance up towards the front and see that in my place the witch is parting the fog so Meadow can drive safely onto the dirt track, back to our main entrance and we're almost there. Leyanne seems relaxed, Meadow too, as though the seven hours of chatting time has mellowed any mistrust between them. I wish I had stayed awake long enough to get to know more about this witch, but I guess it's too late now.

A huge black form, so familiar it wounds me just seeing him so suddenly, jumps right in front of the truck in a bid to swerve us into a crash. I instinctively lift my hands, cutting passed the two figures seated before me and throw him aside in instinct, catching him before he hits the ground and carefully nestle him on the bushes, so Meadow doesn't have to run over her alpha. I think hitting her mate was enough on the way out, I don't want Colton being added to her guilt list. I try not to take anything from the moment, pushing down the biting pain and remind myself we have the witch, who soon will help me get him back. I have to cling onto hope, that my mate will be free to come home soon.

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Leyanne glances back at me knowingly, shifting in her seat, and I see the smirk that she knows she just met my mate. That little eyebrow wiggle and 'hmmmm' which spells out 'interesting'. I just don't understand her at all. She is neither likeable, nor unlikeable. Somewhere between good and bad and I can't decide if I trust or don't. She gives off so many mixed signals but yet Sierra put so much faith in her.

"Home stretch, brace yourselves because I feel like they're going to throw everything they can at us before we cross the rune line." Meadow warns, snapping my gaze back from Leyanne and almost on cue the truck begins to shudder and wobble, and grind and groan, with revving effort as dozens of wolves fly and pile up on top of us. Try as we might, between the witch and I we can only keep sweeping them off for seconds at a time as though they somehow figured out how to cling on when they couldn't before.

One last shudder as it feels like the groaning roof might come down on top of us, a slight buckling of metal as Carmen and I sit transfixed to it above and whoosh. Travelling into the fogless air, over the protection line, swipes off the ones over our head with a dramatic flurry of bodies flying backwards. We accelerate with a last lurch of speed, skid, and crunch into the gravel in the front of the house with a noisy halt that sends us all falling forward to brace ourselves. We are only minutes before sunset and the timing couldn't be any closer. I shudder when I think of the difference if we had more of Darrius' kind here, daylight walkers who seem way more capable than the brain-dead fanged freaks of our mountain.

"Home sweet home." Carmen mumbles and kicks off the blanket she was cradling to her stomach before jumping down to her feet and casting me a bank look. "You should eat right away... you haven't at all, and you have more than you to keep fed." it's a stern telling off, delivered in her usual haughty tone but somehow, I'm getting used to her manner. I see the care behind the words and my whole face softens at her scrutiny. The icy coldness, the blunt often rude way she has of letting words fall out of her mouth. She's a hard a**. No softness at all and that's what tells me that underneath that prickly shell, Carmen might actually be even softer than Meadow. She just doesn't have anyone to give it to, or trust enough to show it. It's a way of shielding herself and acting like she cares about no one. She can't be hurt by people if she doesn't give anyone the opportunity to get close enough to try.

Jasper would have been that chance to nurture the hints of love I see glimpses of in her, and now, I have no idea what the hell is going to happen there. I'm angry at him, disappointed in what he did and her standing here before me, I want to beat my stupid brother in the face. Even if I am overjoyed and still in shock that he's even still alive.

"I need to see Sierra first and then .." I start to explain and follow her to the front to get out, but Meadow cuts me off.

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"No, she's right. Go to the kitchens and eat. I'll take Leyanne to Sierra, and Carmen can make sure you get food first. Luna, you're home. Your priority right now is giving your unborn what they need. Let us manage things for you." It's her

'I'm in charge' bossy tone that likes to pop up when she thinks Colton would want her to take over for me. I can't fault her love.

I know arguing is futile and I'm weak and a little dizzy with lack of nourishment from the journey as it is. I haven't eaten since yesterday, since before we found Leyanne and were eating while we drove. I hadn't thought about it before and guilt flushes through me as I realize how careless it is. I have to be more responsible of the children in my body.

I follow Carmen without further protest and we're immediately swarmed by pack sentinels who saw our arrival or were summoned by Meds. They start unloading the truck and greeting our return with submissive nods and uttering 'Luna' under their breaths. A huge sense of relief in the air around me as tense guards relax at finally laying eyes on us back home. I can taste the agony my departure caused, and I am weighed down with another layer of remorse that I abandoned them. Despite the emotions, nothing is amiss in any of them, or our surroundings, and it looks like our absence didn't cause much upheaval to the pack at all. Nothing has happened since we left.

It feels good to be home but standing in the almost darkness and staring at that imposing fog, knowing Colton isn't inside to greet me. To shower me with his love and hugs, that I need more than air. He's out there, watching and waiting for his chance to wound me instead, and it dampens my joy down completely. Heart tearing with the return to real, eyes misting that we are so close yet still so far in terms of bringing them out of the fog.

Instinct pulls me to the nearest wall of mist, and I get close enough to the tree line that I can see out through the forest at where the fog physically meets the boundary. Straining to see as Carmen hangs back, sensing I need a moment.

"Colton.... If you can hear me.... You have more than me to fight for now, don't give up. We're working on it. I love you and I miss you." its loud enough that my voice travels on the wind and yet quiet enough and directed away from the house to not echo around the drive. Only Carmen will have caught it and she remains silent and at a distance, giving me some space and showing respect.

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The fog twirls and moves in the wind and for a second I catch a glimpse of a lone dark figure directly in front, separated by the twenty feet or so of wood and he's staring right at me. Full on wolf form, black, devastating in size, claws extended in readiness, and glistening in the moon light. He's a sight to behold on any given day, but like this, how he is just shreds my emotions into frenzied pain and aches heavily in my chest. His eyes are still empty darkness, and his growling snarl is unmistakable to my ears. I would know Colton anywhere, no matter the distance.

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He's warning me that I'm his prey and if this wall wasn't holding him back, nothing I could say would stop him from tearing me limb from limb. We connect for one second, a tiny fragment between my mate and I and yet I feel only his desire to kill me. Its intensity is shocking and overwhelming to my soul. I shudder, turning away with tears blinding my eyes, to shut him out and jump when I bump into Carmen right behind me. She's moved closer as though to make sure I didn't stray closer to the border. Lingered to protect.

"It's not really him.... He doesn't know what he's doing. This isn't who he is, and you know it. When the spell's broken, Luna, he'll smother you with love and protect you and his children with the ferocity of what you see standing out there now. Try and not let this get to you... at least you know his heart is willing when everything else is pulled away." Her sadness bites through and she rubs my shoulder lightly, rare physical contact, before turning on her heel and walking towards the house. She gestures me to follow and seems sure I am coming now, I blink after her in astonishment, the hints of that caring person I see in her sometimes, shining through and reminding me just how unfair life can be.

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"Carmen? Jasper...." I don't know what words I intended but his name alone dies on my lips with the pain from my own heart at saying it. I realize I have no idea how to console her at all, when I don't even know how to process myself that my brother stands against us. Her aura changes to cold and closed stiffness instantly.

"Don't. Karma, remember? I deserved this." She shrugs, that controlled mask of indifference back in place and moves off, throwing her feelings away. Still walking without looking back and I silently shake my head.

No, you don't.

I maybe used to think she deserved all kinds of awful to happen to her for her part in my pain, but not anymore. I hate that she now suffers all the things I did in some strange balance that seems to be intent on making her feel everything I once suffered through – the death of my mom, the loss of the pack, the mistreatment under Juan's care. The rejection of an imprinted mate because of who she is. Walking alone as though cut off from the shore, while trying to find her place in a new order of things. She's the outsider now.

Carmen doesn't deserve to keep being put through all of this and she's stronger than most, to keep getting up to fight over and over again. Jasper, he was always so loving, so loyal and I know that if she weren't a Santo, he would be the kind of mate she could only dream of. As a brother he was everything in my world, my rock, my safe haven, and I don't doubt a mate would be even more cherished. He would love her in ways that would heal all her wounds, protect her, and show her what worth and stability are in the same way he showed me.

She just happened to have the wrong name.... and nothing to do with a feud that meant her mate despises her for that one detail alone. Jasper is an idiot to not see beyond his own hatred.

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"I should go see Sierra first while you see what the kitchen has to offer. I'll come right back, I swear. She'll want to see me, know I'm safe. I know how she is, and her worry won't subside without it. Besides, I have to tell her about...." I glance down at my stomach, feeling awkward and still not fully confident in this new little fact at all. I still need to have it confirmed but yet, deep down inside since Leyanne told me, I have known it to be true. I can sense something now which I ignored before and I'm certain it was two little lives. Carmen nods sadly when I catch up with her and link my hand in hers loosely, a natural movement borne of being friends with Meadow. She hesitates, flexes her fingers and her hand pauses but doesn't pull away and avoids looking at me directly.

"I can get something for you and bring it up to her suite. I'm sure Sierra will be happy to see her daughter in the flesh, even if the witch is monopolizing her attention." Her tone is tight, a slight lacing of something under the surface that I can't read. Her emotions are shielded effectively, and I sigh inwardly that she just won't let her guard down. Not even around her Luna.

I'm glad she doesn't argue with me the way Meadow does on this, and we part at the inner stairway when we get inside the house. Just the air and the atmosphere alone make me see how much tension I've been holding in my body these last couple of days and I exhale to release some of it. My body sagging at the familiar and safe surroundings, the very air in this space calling me home and soothing that eternal weight of pain in my chest. If he wasn't missing in this scene, then this would be heaven to return to.

It feels less despairing than before we left. We have the witch, we have crazy revelations about my mother, and we have hope of not only fixing this mess of this spell but ending the war. Something we never knew how to achieve before. Which if we do, leaves only one little problem left in our list of all things we have lost sleep over in recent months. Juan Santo and our mountain.

With the threat of vampires out of the way, maybe our focus on saving our people might actually become priority when we get Colton back. And then Jasper... my brother out there in the world posing a new kind of threat if he sticks to his word and comes after my people for what was done to our family. I can't even contemplate that right now and what will happen if he holds true to his word. Jasper against me... or even against Colton. I know he would lose. He's strong, his gift is speed which is why he probably escaped Juan so long ago. His hyper speed compared to other wolves is twice as fast, but he's no alpha and he would never be a match for my mate. Colton is stronger, has more aggression in his pinky, and is battle worn and calculative in a fight. I don't know of Jaspers training these past ten years with the vampires, and I was shocked at his level of hostile, but I could still sense he wouldn't be able to take me alone, let alone with my mate.

I don't want to fight him, especially not when at the root of his goal is the pain of our loss. He loved our pack, our family, our parents. He lost everyone, even thought I was gone, his home, and has had to carve out life within the lap of those he was once afraid of as the enemy. Creatures he rose against in battle and had been ingrained to fear since childhood. Living with vampires for a decade can't have been all that great.

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And then there's that which completely confuses me.... vampires accepted a wolf and let him live. Not as a slave or a mistreated being, but as one of them. Initiated into their coven from what Darrius blurted out, which raises a whole lot of questions about the morality and laws of what we once believed were only monsters. It seems this breed we never knew existed, is far superior in so many ways to those things out in the woods. Miles apart physically but also in morality too. It shakes everything I thought I knew about them.

I need to talk to Leyanne about the difference between the born and the turned, and if there is one, how the hell we create peace once more so that no more blood has to fall on either side. I don't fancy our chances should the born vampires come into play and be the ones to stand in battle against us instead.

I can't even begin to contemplate my own heritage and that's a whole head mess I'm leaving aside for now. If I'm royalty... I've been killing my own kind for the past months and hating them, while maybe I might have had a chance at stopping this. My head aches with all of it and I don't even know how to start pulling it apart, turning it over or figuring it out. That's always been Colton's forte. To see things and figure out the chess moves, lay it out in a logical way. I miss him so much more with every second I need him to be here.

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I make my way upstairs and head for Sierra's wing, hearing the voices ahead of me before I get there and let myself into the open breakfast room where they are. Sierra, Leyanne, and Meadow are sat around the table while Sierra talks in an animated fashion, obviously excited and relief over our return. She's clasping Leyanne's hands and gushing her way like some weird fan girl. The adoration and respect oozing from every pore at seeing this witch.

"I can't believe you came, that you're here. We can't thank you enough. You have no idea how much this means to have a witch like you, grace us with your presence and help." Sierra is laying it on thick but not in a dishonest way and I really have no clue why she seems to idolize her so much. The witch has a lukewarm personality that is grating most of the time.

Leyanne looks moderately amused and slides her hands out of her overbearing grip confidently, making it clear she isn't one for touchy feely the way Sierra is. It's not done to humiliate, and my mother in law barely registers the loss of touch as that velvety accent flows out and distracts her.

"You know I like a challenge and this spell...certainly is that." Leyanne points out, her normal amused smugness leaching through and I impulsively interrupt.

"Meaning?" some sort of deflation of hope sizzles in my stomach, reading between her words and looking for fault as three sets of eyes glance to me at my

intrusion. I can feel Meadow's visual telling off as she knows there's no way I've eaten yet, while Sierra leaps up and runs to me without hesitation.

"Oh god, my girl. You're home!" She hugs me tight, wrapping me in a bear like grip that almost breaks bones and I sink into her embrace giving her the moment she needs to be sure I truly am okay. I strain to breathe properly but I know it's only the force of her love leeching out to smother me. I have to tell her about the babies, but not yet, its better if it's when it's just us and she can absorb the moment. I feel she would try to downplay her joy when serious and pressing matters are on the table before us.

"Sierra was right about one thing... no single witch could pull off a spell this big alone, and after feeling it for myself, I'm certain of it. It's a collective use of magic and most definitely coven based. Trickier to decipher and demolish but not impossible. I need some time to do a little research." Leyanne shrugs as though we're talking about getting a stain out of laundry and not pulling apart crazy dark magic that has possessed dozens of wolves all over the state.

"So you can break it?" Meadow interjects as Sierra and I make our way to the table, arm in arm, connected, and slide into seats in front of them. Sierra never letting go of my hand, clasped tightly in hers and it brings me some comfort to know how much she has missed me.

"I need to find the source. Where it started. To break it, I need to face where it was made. Most magic has a weakness, and normally it's right at the root." Leyanne taps her manicured nails on the surface of the polished table, seemingly thinking as seriousness returns to the air.

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"It came from the mountain in the south, we're guessing it's where it started but that's also where we think the vampires congregate in this area to sleep the day away." I point out and scratch my head, wondering how we get the witch up there without vampires attacking. And if we go in day, we have the wolves to contend with. We have no ideas where the spell was cast but I guess if it floated from that way, then it's a possibility. If she needs the source, then it's our best bet.

"This might be troublesome. I'm more than capable of wading through wolves or vampires alone, but once I get there and witches try their hand, I don't think even I can handle all on my own and still be able to focus on the task at hand. I will need to be given space to try and dismantle the spell. I can't be spreading my gifts so thinly."

"What're you saying?" Sierra raises a brow; a slight look of worry crossing her face but Meadow cuts in first. Seemingly catching on quick and somehow more in sync with her after sitting together for hours on the journey home.

"She needs us to help her get to the lair, distract the wolves and the vampires while she takes care of the witches and the spell. In other words, the pack has to go out and fight." Meadow and Leyanne lock eyes, a nod of agreement between them and my heart sinks like a heavy weight in water.

Yeah, that's what I hoped she wasn't saying. A part of me shrivels up inside, fear returning and hope dimming. I truly thought that being a powerful witch meant she could somehow break it without having to leave the safety of the homestead. I thought it was going to be an easy fix from here on out and only a matter of days to help her figure out the how.

"One problem, we're lacking our strongest fighters and there is less than ten of us here who can actually go out there and fight our own, or the vampires without dying." The words tumble from my lips hopeless in sound and my eyes stray to my hand in my lap which are clenched with the return of stress.

"There's another problem too." Meadow sighs, seeing my slumped posture and leans to me to pull my hands to her grasp on the table. "If we go in day, we fight our own... if we go in night, we fight both. There's literally no getting away from taking on our own pack in this, because they don't need to hide from the sun, and they can stay awake at any time."

"Vampires don't need to sleep in daytime either, they just need to stay in shade... which means if the source is in the mountain... we will be dealing with both, no matter when we go." Leyanne breaks the great news, killing us with her knowledge and dashing more of that joyful light I came home with. I rub my face, a question arising again that has followed me since Darrius. A tremor of fear that maybe this is something we might come up against when we near the mountain, as he said there were more of 'his kind'.

"How come Darrius can walk in the sun?" I interject and Leyanne perks up with a look of surprise that I even remembered this detail. She turns her body my way, placing her palms flat on the table with such a sheer vibe of calm that it irks me a little. Her total lack of being flustered over anything at all is starting to irritate me.

"There are a lot of myths and folklore about vampires that were made stronger by these halflings you've encountered. True born... they aren't like the ones you've been fighting the past few centuries. None of the rules apply to them. So forget your Twilight and Interview with a Vampire or Hollywood crap. It's human folklore." She chuckles at the mention of movies I've heard of but never watched. I had zero interest in watching anything about their kind over the past decades while in the home. I raise a skeptical brow her way, sighing at how little we truly know of this new breed to us. All our information was based on the halflings we met in battle.

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"You're saying they can walk in and out of the sun, without being hurt? And what else?" Meadow perks up, interested too, although I can sense her alarm at this fact and Sierra even seems intrigued by this newfound information.

"Probably the opposite of every stereotypical fact the humans have ever told in stories... they sleep in beds, usually at night. And yes, they need it too. They eat food, drink other liquids, usually booze, and only need blood to survive in small doses. Party animals actually, really sociable with one another and live-in coveys for all night raves and the what. They can feed from one another too, which is

common in mated vamps given feeding can be s**ual. They're not afraid of garlic, holy water, or wooden stakes, and they do have reflections, and five o'clock shadows if they are male. It's always been one of the weirdest ones I heard that a vampire can never have a beard...I mean if that was true then how do they grow hair? ... Oh, and they are known to live peaceably with humans... but that's a whole other story about tributes and such, not for now."

I blink at that last sentence, trying to get my head around a Vampire living with a human and not eating them, blanching at her as though maybe she's winding us up. That' can't be true. I met Darrius, he definitely did not seem like a vampire who would tolerate a human living with him, not even for on the go feeding.

"Do they sparkle?" Meadow chuckles, breaking into my thoughts and mocking this species in her own sarcastic way. I eye roll at her but giggle while Leyanne shakes her head.

"No... no glitter. Sadly. Might pretty up their dark and drab love of living in old castles and smelly gothic lairs. Not that I can talk, mind you... Darrius is a prime example of what true bloods look like. Red eyes, warm skin..."

"Wait, what, red?" Meadow is the one to question in bold shock, and stares at me for a second, blinking as it dawns on her why mine are red too. Knowing fine well all the ones we encountered had amber eyes like ours, or palest orange, always dull though and not glowy like a wolf. She didn't seem to really take note of Darrius when her focus was on me this morning so I'm guessing she missed his devil look.

"Sounds like I missed a whole lot." Sierra's face crumples with concern at the mention of us meeting vampires and I doubt she got very much from these two before I walked up here.

"I can memory share everything when we're alone. I need to talk to you by myself." I add softly giving Meadow the hint I want some time out to share my news. Leyanne seems to pick up on it too, that I don't want them to mention the pregnancy until I get to do it alone with her. Meadow smiles softly and nods and Leyanne remains completely unchanged although she seems to agree without any kind of gesture.

"I need a place to work and figure out some things. Do you still access the tunnels to the grimoire library?" Leyanne glances to Sierra and gets a nod which seems to brighten her expression.

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"Yes, Meadow can take you, seeing as I know you don't need help with access. Take as long as you need." Sierra graciously offers and stands to show respect to the leaving witch. This is Leyanne's way of giving us space I guess and Sierra's way of leaving us alone, so we get no arguments.

As they rise to leave a knock on the door sees a guard bringing in food sent from Carmen, but no sign of her behind and I raise a brow at the lack of her presence.

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"Carmen asked me to deliver this and inform you she has retired to her room. She hopes the Luna understands she needs to lay down for a little while." He answers a question before I even ask, and I sit back when the chicken salad and pasta is laid out before me as he retreats in the same direction as Meadow and Leyanne. I have no issue with Carmen needing alone time, I'm just saddened that she carries everything alone.

"Thank you." I throw after him and push my plate closer to Sierra seeing the monster portion Carmen has sent up. I think she took eating for three as a literal guide. It's almost overflowing and most definitely is too much for even one half-starved wolf.

"Want to share?" I smile softly at my Rema, but she shakes her head. Her eyes steady on me, as she seems to be reading my posture, thinking something through.

"I ate already but go ahead, you look tired and famished. Now what is it you want to talk about. How was the journey? Did you see Colton out there?" Her voice is strained, obvious emotion lingering in her throat at the mention of her son and I wonder how many times she has seen him through the fog and saw how feral our pack seem to be. I can feel her agony at how they're living. Like wild animals out there.

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I know showing her the memories first will and answer all her questions, and tell her what it is I want to share, but I don't want it that way. I want her reaction face on, from my own words, to see the light of happiness break in that sad expression. I pull her hand to mine and cradle it against my cheek impulsively. Needing my adopted mother's touch as a grounding force for my chaotic emotions. I take a steadying breath and rip off the band aid.

"You're going to be a grandmother.... To twins." I breathe it out finding it weird to say the words loud, so matter of factly, my heart suddenly hammering in my chest. She gasps and retracts her hand in shock as she covers her mouth, overwhelmed and not expecting this statement, while tears spring to her eyes. I can read her instant abundance of happiness and it warms my cold soul, rearing me a little that this is not as awful as it seemed at first.

"You're.... you're sure?" she begins to blubber, her words broken, her mouth trembling. Emotions frayed, which pushes my own to frazzle too and my eyes mist over. Regret and longing hitting my heart that I would give anything for Colton to be here for this. There's a hint of tension that she doesn't want to get her hopes up, an underlying glimmer of fear because I know she suffered so many losses when trying to carry a child.

“Well, I only have the witch’s word for it, but I intend to have the doctor confirm at least the fact I’m pregnant tomorrow when we’ve all rested well. She assured me on the best way to carry to full term too, so don’t worry. Okay?” I throw it out there, seeing the smoothing of her brow as that nigger is exposed and she smiles so widely it’s almost like being beamed on by the sun.

“If Leyanne says it’s so, I wouldn’t doubt it. Oh Alora, I’m so happy, Colton’s going to be so ...” the words die on her lips and her joy diminishes into real tears of pain as his name slices a wound in both our hearts. The effervescent mood tumbling back to the abyss with one simple word.

“Yes, he will.... when we get him home. Because that’s what’s going to happen and there’s no other way that’s going to go.” I state, sounding surer than I feel but knowing I have to believe or else I might not get through another hour. Colton’s absence alone is draining me so badly.

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“You heard what she said....” Sierra whimpers uncharacteristically.

“I know, and we’ll deal with that when the time comes, but for now, how about we just enjoy this moment? Take it for what it is. I’m carrying Colton’s babies... my babies. Your blood...a chance to relive all those things you lost out on. Helping raise two healthy pups and experiencing all those firsts again.” I inject a lighthearted tone, grab her hand and squeeze it tight. Trying to sound excited for her sake, knowing how important this is to her.

Sierra’s eyes lift as do her brows, as some of the joy returns at my words, drying her eyes and she nods brightly. Her mood wavering but she can’t conceal the genuine happy.

“You’re right.... My son’s little ones will be so like him, all over again, only in double. I’m so unbelievably thrilled.”

Deep down, I think part of me is even more joyful for her than for myself at this news. For right now anyway while I have so many burdens and worries to carry about their existence.

Sierra’s loneliness, her pining for what she lost, maybe my children can play a part in healing her wounds and giving her, something only watching a child of her bloodline grow can give her. It’s not exactly a do over, but its close enough. She’ll have more than just Colton and I to adore and cherish and my babies will fill her heart in ways we can’t. They truly are a blessing.

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“Okay, show me what I missed, then I can go the rest of my evening bubbling over with happiness at this wonderful news. These children are going to be so loved.” It seems after a moment to absorb it; her energy and excitement finally shows face. Like she needed my permission to forget about the fog for a second. It

raises my spirt and I smile at her, basking in the warmth she gives, but then my face falling as I realize I now have to fill in the gaps too.

Oh boy.....

Now the part I'm not looking forward to and knowing that she's going to see everything that I did. She's going to find out I'm way more vampire than I ever knew I could be. I'm not exactly happy about that.

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It's been four days since Leyanne got here and I still cannot get any kind of read on her. She's annoyingly distant, still likes to play vague and although she gives us zero indication that we can't trust her, it's always there swirling around like an underlying coldness. I don't know if it's like Carmen, with her wall of explainable hostile to keep people at bay. Or if her magic somehow gives her this aura of power and distance, but I get severe lonely and empty vibes from her that I can't quite decipher.

Not much has happened while we go through the motions of current daily life and plod along. Carmen isn't really showing face often, only in brief pa**ing, and seems to stick to her room which is understandable. Given how much she now has to process while we have downtime. She asked for time, to grieve, to absorb, to be alone with the pangs of missing her newfound mate and the loss of her family and I let her alone. She needs time and understanding, two things I never had when I suffered similar things and I want to give her that. I feel it's the least I can do, to soften her pain in some way because I feel responsible for all of it. Even though I know I'm not.

Meadow is overseeing the patrols, the sentinel shifts, and the village, to make sure no one ventures beyond the rune line and we are trying to present as much normal as we can. All while Leyanne and Sierra lock themselves below the house and pour over grimoires in a bid to figure out the best way to combat this damn fog. On the surface everything seems fine, despite what we all know but don't talk about, but it's not and their absence invades the air more by the hour every day.

I am under orders to rest, to retain my energy and everyone in the house is treating me like fragile gla**. Sierra has stopped pushing me to confirm the pregnancy as I decided I would wait for him. To let him be part of that confirmation when he comes home. I need to give him something in this news, a sweet way to remember the moment seeing as the discovery was not sweet at all.

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I miss him so badly that I find myself wandering to the border to catch glimpses of him, even if it's fury filled and he's looking at me like he wants to devour me and throw my carca** to his pack. He still doesn't recognize me and he still views me as something to kill.

I'm in agony, broken without him, pining for him more so as the days stretch into endlessness. I've cried myself to sleep so many times, only to wake an hour later at the loss of his heat beside me and start all over again. My mind eternally muggy with tiredness and loss. I can't stand waking alone, missing his hugs, needing his voice, and his safe presence. I need his stability, his wisdom, his gentleness. I just want him so badly it's destroying me on a mental level I have no way of combatting. I feel like I'm suffocating without him, without them. So close yet so unreachable and seeing him does nothing to alleviate the despair of not being able to talk to him, touch him, or get close. It kills me to look at him, but not seeing him is just as bad.

The sub pack, the rest of our sentinels, and our people too; I feel their loss like grieving my family all over again. All out there staring inward, and hell bent on getting their chance at coming for us as soon as they can.

What they don't know is that it's coming. It's the one thing I know for certain, whether she finds a way to completely dissolve the fog effortlessly, or with extra effort. She is adamant she still has to get in the mountain to do it but she is confident that she will break this curse. We need to get her through our wolves, and through those vampires, to find the witches and deal with what they have done. We won't abandon our people and leave them to grow old and lost in the forests around their home.

"You know that whatever the plan is, you can't come, Chica." Meadow breaks into my thoughts as we walk the perimeter together near dusk. Some nights I need this to be able to sleep at all, just to glimpse him before I go to our room alone. Meadow and I taking some time together to escape for a few minutes and forget everything weighing on us for a second. It feels like the responsibility has been suffocating these past days and times alone and away from the house just to take a breath is all that is getting us through. Meadow is suffering Cesar's loss as I suffer Colton's and she's getting weary and low as the days drag one., Her fighting spirit is barely holding on.

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"You know I have to. Meadow, I'm still the strongest of all that we have, even if I cannot turn. I'm a better chance of success than ten of the land wolves from the village. I can't let others do what I can do better." I try to hold my ground, even if I know where her concern comes from.

"You can't turn... What if you get hurt? What if you need to heal?" Meadow stops me with a hand on my wrist and turns me to her, seriousness etched over her face and her eyes gleaming with worry.

"I'll just have to make sure I don't get injured, won't I? With my gifts it shouldn't be hard to build a bubble around myself if I get cornered. I need to lead; I need to be there with my pack to fight through what we have to. They need to see me

lead." I lift my hand and run gentle fingers across her cheek to try and convince her that this is what's best, but Meadow grabs me with force and hugs me against her somewhat aggressively.

Meadows voice breaks with sheer emotion, against my hair as her emotions spill out.

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"I promised him, that no matter what, I would always protect you for him.... I swore, Chica, so many months ago, that if anything ever happened and he couldn't get to you first, then I would. This isn't protecting you." Her croaks turn to sobs, burying her damp face against my hair and our cheeks lay side by side, feeling her agony seeping out, and it almost breaks me in two. Bringing him up this way, knowing he made her promise something like that way back then, and the ache of my pain at longing for him brings tears to my own eyes. He always thought of me above everything and always puts me first. Even not here, his influence is Meadow, and she speaks for him.

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"I can't be a Luna and yet hide behind everyone else. I need to be the one to protect my people, even you. Even him. I've been sheltered for too long by him, by you, by everything he has in place to make sure I never have to really put myself out there. I have to be the one to do this, lead all of you. I have to be worthy of being his mate when it's called for." My words are not just for her, but for my own heart too and the doubts I have circling inside like a brewing storm. I could so easily use my children as an excuse to stay here and let them go out and fight in my name, but what kind of Luna would that make me. I know I have gifts that others don't possess, and I know that the fates will only be happy when I fulfill the role they have asked of me all along. I need to do this.

"You have more to protect than just you... you heard what she said that night. About getting weaker, being vulnerable with your gifts. I've seen it with my own eyes these last days, happening so quickly. Lorey, you're not invincible and I see you fading." Meadow's stubborn tone only softens my resolve a little, but I know I can't give up.

"Then we need to do it sooner rather than later, before I worsen. Part of this is my broken heart and emotional exhaustion from being apart and won't hinder me out there when I know it's to save him. Right now, my gift is still strong enough... and I have no choice." With no word from Darrius and no sign of the vampires receding... we have to do this. I don't want to wait for something that may never come. There was no guarantee that the high lord would do anything when he found out I lived and Meds is right, I am weakening much faster than I ever anticipated. These past days my tiredness has been severe, my skills at harnessing energy has dampened a little and I seem to wear out so quickly from even menial tasks. We have to break the spell ourselves and bring them home

before I do end up completely useless. Leyanne suggested that being twins, and hybrids, are why it's so much harder on me than expected. I'm feeding all my energy to two little powers in the making and my body is trying to keep up.

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"There's nothing I can say is there? I can't lock you up, or even have Sierra hold you captive. You're stronger than us, even when you're pregnant." Meadow sighs, knowing defeat when she feels it and I hug her tight. Wrapping her in a maternal embrace and stroke her hair lovingly.

"Exactly.... so all the more reason I should be the one to lead and take Leyanne to the mountain with you. We can't leave our people alone without anyone, so Sierra must stay and watch those who truly cannot come, and so must the ones who may need to continue protecting them if we fail." The plan was always to assemble our strongest few, a small army, and march together in hopes we'll be enough. Leaving behind enough of the Santo pack that their bloodline will live on.

"You realize if we fail, that means you don't come back either... and if you die, so does Colton, so does the Rema." Meadow pulls back, blinking at me through misty eyes and wipes her face. Unable to shield me from her genuine fear. The air between us heavy with so many swirling emotions and I can't fight the growing anxiety from knowing all that could happen.

"I've thought of that... it would mean that so does Juan. So at least in some way the others can return to the mountain when the spell finally fades. They can rebuild, elect a new alpha, and life will carry on. I've already asked Leyanne to help me leave instructions for the villagers should they need to move on without us."

"I don't like this. You're talking like you don't expect us to succeed. So what are we even doing, huh? If you're leaving secret plans for the people to forget us then why don't we wait, find another way." Meadow falls back into open crying, her lip trembling and her voice faltering. The strong and sa**y warrior crumbling when faced with the possibility of losing so much more. Her heart has always been bigger than her fierce and only those she loves most ever see this side to her.

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"I'm being smart.... it's not that I think we'll fail! I just have to make sure that if we do, the pack have a plan, have some place to aim if everything goes wrong. I need to pay attention to the details in the way Colton would. He always has a backup plan, always covers all bases."

I'm doing what a Luna does. Preparing for the worst. Putting provisions in place should my people be left without Luna, Alpha or Rema or any of the strongest that have protected them most of their lives. I have chosen a wolf as beneficiary to stay behind and oversee the financial security of the pack, the making sure they have all they need. They will be the one that is left with my instructions to carry out should we perish out there.

"It feels like tempting fate and signing off on our death certificates." Meadow breaks loose and walks away from me and stalks to the tree line, gazing out into the fog. She shudders when the dark shadows that always linger and wait out there, flash past eerily, her face paling as she recognizes the one she can't bear to look at. Unlike me, Meds actively avoids seeing her mate out there, she can't handle it and wants to pretend he's asleep somewhere and not here like this. They are always watching, always waiting, poised for our take down and it just adds to the growing unease in our homestead.

"The fates are on our side. They wouldn't have sent us to fetch Leyanne if they weren't. I have faith in what they plan..... please, Meds, have faith in me." I ask of her, my voice laced with conviction that I don't truly feel, and Meadow slumps down into the gra** and tugs at stems and throws them into the airless space around her.

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"You sound more like him every day. He even said the same thing to me the day he defeated his father.... 'have faith in me'.... Look where that got us, huh? God, that boy... I miss him so much. I miss my Cesar; I miss all of them. Even those stupid twins and all their frustrating antics. I feel like my heart is ripped apart and the pieces were left s***tered someplace cold." Her tears fall fast, a watery smile appearing on her face as she reminisces over our sub pack and then frowns as the pain of their memory aches all over again.

Her words warm me though and somehow give me some pride. That maybe Colton, he would be a little proud of how I was holding this together. That enough of him rubbed off on me that it's somehow getting me through even though he's not with me to hold me up. Colton is a leader, to the core. I learned from the best and if I can only be a fraction of what he is, then I will never fail. Our sub pack and our boys will come home if I can be anything like he is.

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"Has Leyanne said how much longer she needs?" I pull us back to our topic in hand, walking to her and kneeling down to meet her face and Meadow deflates completely.

"She's ready to go whenever we are. She's as ready as she can be, and they're just going over the same things until we say it's happening." That downward shuffle of her eyes tells me this is a confession of sorts. I eye her up and know with that admission that Meadow is the one who has delayed things. Knowing she didn't want me to be a part of this, she's made sure I thought there was still time to change the plan. Maybe she was holding out for the vampires to pull back and for the high lord to intervene... either way, I can tell she's kept this close to her chest, so I won't push us to just do it.

This girl! Protecting me even by delaying reunion with her own mate. I can't be mad at her for that.

“So... by day or night? Which works in our favor.” I don’t intend to argue over this with her or make her feel worse or get bogged down in these emotional details. I just need us to do this and stop the climbing anticipation and anxiety from growing further.

“Day... it separates them. Wolves to the woods, Vampires to the mountain. Even if the wolves follow us, it still makes it less likely of encountering them all out here in the space when our goal is the mountain. We may not be enough to fight them all once when we get there, but the witch just needs her moment. We need to distract and give her a little time. Once she breaks the spell, the wolves come back to us and the vampires become less of a problem when we want to leave. We just need to hold our own until she does what she needs to do.” Meadow stops crying, pulls herself together and sits up to gaze at me. My bossy commander coming back to me when she knows she has to accept and get on with her duty.

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“And how many of us do we have that are capable of helping and not hindering?” I ask gently, knowing all this she has kept quiet from me until now.

“We have less than a dozen who are fight ready, but we can make up numbers to two dozen with males from the village who are willing to try. The stronger ones... faster ones, and some with unique gifts.”

My heart sinks and my pulse quickens, knowing that’s less than I hoped for.

“Against dozens of our own... we’re still going to be so small. Outnumbered by our fiercest. God, how did we let this happen?” The despair rings in my tone, no need to pretend I am not freaking out in front of her, because she know sit too. Meadow rubs her face, sighing heavily to calm herself and grabs my hand to rea**ure me.

“There’s no point pondering on the how... that won’t give you the right mindset to get through it.” Carmen’s voice startles us from out of nowhere, strong and clear with that b***y tone that separates her from other femmes. We both turn in shock at the presence that has been elusive for days, expecting to see a moody and frosty Carmen, but she looks awful though.

Dark circles under her eyes where normally her skin was fair and blemish free; her figure is slimmer, like she’s not eating well and she has a pale pallor and tiredness to her eyes that suggest she isn’t sleeping either. I never saw her this way, not even back when Colton and she were falling apart, and it shocks me to my core to see her so unkempt. All her life and vigor is missing.

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“True.” I concur, not drawing attention to how rough she looks and welcome her with a gesture, a flick of my fingers to come over and join us.

“How have you been, Chica?” Meadow is the one to ask, softer with her since Jasper rejected her that day and Carmen shrugs, dismissing it with a sigh. Another non answer that she’s so good at. She moves nearer but doesn’t sit down on the gra** with us, just lingers as though she feels like she’s invading. My heart aches for this girl anytime I see her now, and I just wish she would trust even me enough to let someone close. After those days away, I thought

we would have at least taken a step forward as friends. All she did upon return was push everyone further away and killed any progress I thought I might have made with her.

“Raring to go beat the s*** out of vampire a** and teach those witches a thing or two.” Her tone is familiar old haughty Carmen but the intent behind it seems forced. She gives off an aura of emptiness and I frown at her, trying so hard to get a read properly on her emotions but get that cold wall again.

“Sure, you’re up to it?” I query, not entirely convinced she has it in her to be helpful but her stubborn jut of her chin and the way she pulls her shoulders back speaks volumes.

“Yes! How else am I going to vent all this rage and fury to get it out of my system. Those monsters took my mom... I have a score to settle and I’m sorry, I know they’re also kind of your people, but your brother is right. You have to avenge those you love, or it festers, and it no longer matters if people you care about are connected in some way.” There’s an icy edge to her words that sobers the mood.

Meadow catches my eye over the top of her head, a worried glance at Carmen’s mental state but I one shoulder shrug it off. I know what she means and how she feels. She’s hurting, and much like Jasper, she feels that only taking some action against the cause of that pain will ease some of her pain. She’s not unstable, she’s angry, and broken up, and looking to find a way to offload all the horrendous number of feelings coursing through her.

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And no, I don’t care if I’m meant to be half of what those things are. In my head I already separated that issue out and came to a conclusion why killing them has never really been an issue at all. Darrius called them halfings, turned creatures with no real link to those born like we are. They’re not what I am at all... their like lab rats, injected with a booster to make them worthy as soldiers and a pale copy of something they were never meant to be. The ones like me, with red eyes, they have never graced the battlefield and come up against the wolves, well, except one – my father. Wherever he is. So, killing the halfings is nothing at all like killing the ones who share my blood, because they were infected and not created in nature.

“I don’t care how many you kill; god knows we have these past months. I’m not one of them and I understand your need to do this.” It’s a blessing in a way and I lock my eyes on her to push the point that I truly don’t care.

“We should leave at first light... the vampires will have retraced to the mountain to avoid the sun, and we’ve seen the wolves pull back to sleep at night, so they will be surfacing only just. That means we can get halfway to the mountain before we encounter them and less distance to fight while Leyanne gets the rest of the way.” Carmen is obviously someone who has been thinking this through too, and I listen and take in what she says as Meadow nods. Impressed that despite being absent, she is worthy of adding her own input and summarizing things.

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"That makes sense. Instead of fighting from the first step, we make a run for it straight to the mountain in the tiny time gap we have open. If we're lucky we distract them around the base while Leyanne gets in with the ones needed to distract the vampires. Cuts down the time we need to keep fighting against our own and minimizes failure."

"Is the plan... split us in two and take a species each to distract so the witch can go alone?" Carmen finally nestles into the gra** and mimics Meadows habit of ripping out strands of gra** while thinking. I know it's such a tiny movement and insignificant, but by merely sitting down with us, getting on our level, it warms my heart and makes me want to hug her. That step to come closer and be involved again, like she was when we went looking for Leyanne. It's so stupid to get emotional over it but I do, and I blink at her as my eyes mist over and try to conceal it. Damn hormones, from these two minis inside me are making me soft.

"It's the only plan we have. She needs to focus her powers on witches and spells. Not keeping vampires and wolves at bay." Meadow answers her while I pull myself back to normal. Realizing a lot of my up's and downs these past weeks are probably a lot to do with being pregnant before I knew I was.

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"So two dozens of us, several dozen of our pack to get through and probably the same number of vamps... wow, we're really making life easy." Carmen tries to joke with that heavy sarcastic way she has but it's the reality and it's depressing. All things are weighed against us.

"Wolves will kill wolves, you know this?" Meadow brings us all back to somber with her words and we all lower our eyes to the gra** as I slump down onto my b*** away from aching calves. No one has wanted to talk about this, even though it's been hanging in the air since we knew we had to go out there, but we can't keep ignoring it. The ones enchanted will fight to kill, we know this, while our own, they'll fight to keep them at bay and hope that the spell breaks before someone dies. We don't want to hurt our pack, we love them and know this isn't their fault, but they don't have any reason to restrain themselves against us. To them, we're enemies they don't know but only hate.

"Maybe the fates will bless us and no lives that are wolves will be lost in this." I murmur, lacking conviction because even I know that's a far reach but I have to hold onto hope.

"If we don't all come home, I want you guys to do something for me... please. I know it's an ask but...." Carmen pauses mid gra** tugging and takes a silent heavy breath as though trying to steady her emotions. We both turn to her, surprised she has a request, given how self-sufficient she always acts. "Put flowers down for my mom every year. She was innocent in all of this.... She never did wrong to anyone. She didn't deserve to die that away."

"Carmen?" the tears catch in my throat and I throw my arms around her impulsively, reacting to the pain in my chest that swells up by what she said. "You

can do it yourself. You're one of our strongest and fiercest, I have no doubts you will be one who comes back."

Meadow leans forward to her in my embrace and strokes her hair, for once not seeing green at my kindness to the girl, instead offering affection, and she agrees.

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"You skanky puta, stop talking nonsense. Your a** is way too cursed to take the easy way out and you're going be bugging me for eternity just because you can. I'm not so lucky to have a way to get rid of you so easy, huh." Meadows light tone, and sa**y self break the mood and I giggle at her through misted eyes. Carmen laughs too, so unexpectedly it seems to completely change the mood, through a show of tears at Meadow and shakes her head. A sudden warmth between the three of us, a solitude of being sister wolves with one common goal.

"I have no fight left... I'm tired. I don't think I'm meant to come back from this. I'm just meant to make sure you do, especially these... I see that now. It's why they chose him, as a message to what's important, and he rejected me for the reason he did." she rubs my stomach gently from her awkward angle, stunning me with her open affection and a show of Carmen's caring side, and sniffs noisily. "I knew as soon as that witch told you about these, that it's why I was brought back. To stop it happening to you, what happened to me... I don't know how, but I felt it. These two, I'm supposed to make sure they live... whether I do or not."

I stare at her, eyes wide in open mouthed shock. Trying so hard to grasp the pieces together of where she even got that and the clogged feeling in my throat almost kills me. Moved back to tears by this show of softness, a declaration she will protect me and my children and sacrifice herself. The girl who hated me most, and stood in my way, just swore to be my shield and ensure the future of my babies. I can't conjure words as they stick in my mouth and my heart aches with so much. Meadow swallows loudly, her own eyes once again damp.

"I loved him.... These womb fruit.... they're part of you both, and I love them too. My bond to your brother gave me a bond to you as a sister.... I care about you, even if I never wanted to. Your stubborn a**, clingy, little do gooder self, who wormed her way under my wall. God, you're so irritating in that wholesome sweet way I hate. No wonder he likes you." She smiles at me, somewhat in a mocking way, trying to take away the fondness in her tone but it doesn't reach her eyes or touch on the sadness I see there. It tugs a smile from me regardless; a warmth she's finally admitting we have some sort of friendship but an agony that she is only doing so because she thinks she is near the end of her life. "I know it's crazy, and doesn't make sense, but it does to me. I know it's what I'm meant to do to redress everything. I'll make sure no harm comes to you and my life will be yours. Just remember me and take her flowers."

I don't know what to say and Meadows stunned silence mirrors mine. A new heavy tension crackling around us.

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I know it's Carmen's fatigue and her emotional state talking and I in no way believe she has this right. But she's convinced herself and given herself a purpose to feel somehow worthy... because she still thinks she isn't... she's wrong. My babies don't need her sacrifice, they need an aunt, and I'm going to do everything to make sure she comes home as long as we do. She's my family now, even if my brother didn't accept her. She's my sister. Just like Meadow is.

"Carmen, no, that's not how the fates work. They wouldn't make you sacrifice your life to save others." Meadow tries to reason, finally finding a hoarse voice but Carmen shakes her head, and I can see this is futile. She's mentally in pain and I guess the human part of her finally broke. Jasper was the last shove of pressure on a thin and dwindling thread. He took the last ounces of her light and it breaks me inside to know this.

"Isn't that what Sierra did? So why not me too? I'm okay, really, I'm at peace with it.... I don't plan on leaving your side unless I die. I swear to you, Luna... you'll come home, and I'll go accompany mom through to the other side."

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"The Luna should stay with the people... we need you. Protect the Alpha and Rema by being with us."

It almost breaks me, but I shake my head and almost cry as the words burn my throat. Knowing that's the path they would expect, and no one would look down on me for it. I know that it's not what is needed to be done and the fates brought me here to this for one purpose.

"I'm the strongest left here, with the most useful gifts. Without me the mission has less chance of success and our pack will certainly perish out there. I'm sorry, but if there was another way, I would take it..... but there isn't. I have to be your leader and do what's best for the pack. My mate would always put his life on the line for you and I should do the same." The words are killing me as eyes round and faces pale as my words settle in, and I realize tears are starting to roll down my face. The inner heaviness consuming me because on some level, I feel like I'm abandoning my children, and this feels like a goodbye. Terror gripping me coldly that I am truly leading them to their death by leaving them alone to continue without their anchors in life. A pack without an Alpha, nor a Luna, is a pack without it's soul.

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I curse myself for not being as strong as Colton, for not being able to push my fear behind the mask he wears so well and shows them an unbreakable face. I'm not him, and I can't hide what this means for them if I fail.

"Then take more of us.... we outnumber them as a pack, even without our strongest. It's our duty to protect our Luna, for the good of us all." Another voice

calls out and then another with the same sentiment, and I raise my hands to quiet the growing noise.

“No. I can’t risk more lives than I have to... you all have a chance at a future without us if I don’t come back. This is what must be done. There are vulnerable here. Children, pregnant femmes, and older wolves who need to be protected. I will take only those who can fight and stand a chance of surviving. I won’t leave you without means to have a future.” My voice breaks, a burning ache in my throat strangling me as my hormones spiral and I end up wiping my face to try and calm my unstoppable tears. I have no verbal way to express to these people how much I care about them continuing without us, should that be needed. I love all of them and see them as our legacy, to carry on when we’re gone. These are our pack, in our homestead, and we must ensure their survival beyond this fight.

“This isn’t how packs work, Luna.” A male voice echoes my way from the left and I turn to see Tom, the sentinel who helped us leave, stand to voice his own opinion. Keeping his eyes downcast to show me respect but his words are clear. “We protect our Luna in the absence of our Alpha... we stay together, to survive together. That is our nature. Without our Luna, there is no pack. She’s the heart that keeps us as one.... look at the mountain and the years we grew apart without one. Our people divided by names and bloodlines until we shunned those we should have sheltered. We lost our way without our heart....” Tom’s voice carries boldly through the suddenly silent room as Sierra stifles a cry behind me and her guilt and regret at what he’s saying almost end me. Ebbing my way as her own shredded heart bleeds at abandoning them to Juan’s fate and only makes me worse.

“I won’t sacrifice any of you. We’re doing this in the hopes we break the spell and come back to the mountain with our pack and our Alpha. So we can fight to rid ourselves of the vampires, together.” I try to stay firm, push back the feeble tears and find that inner courage I know I possess.

“And how will our Alpha feel to know that when our Luna needed us, we stayed behind like cowards?” another call out, another male, and I falter as I try to find the new voice in the crowd, beginning to get overwhelmed. I feel like I’m losing control of commanding them, even if their words are not against me at all.

“He will know I commanded it and you’re to obey me when he’s not here.” I stammer the words, Sierra grasping my hand from behind to support me and I spot Meadow from the corner of my eye, sliding to sit down. She must have stood to come to my aid and quiet those disrespecting me. She should be hushing those calling out, talking out of turn, disobeying my command, but I can tell she knows they are not doing it with malice and she can’t answer them. She agrees.

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“We can’t obey our Luna when it directly endangers her life... it’s against all we are.” This femme is in the front row, young, bold, and stares me right in the eye with passion despite knowing she’s stepping over the mark and breaking the rules. “You’ve been our rock since you came here. You held us up and stood by his side to keep the people safe. You’ve worked to build the school, the village, the security and sanity of all of us. You care about us and it shows in your people.....

How can you ask us to sit back and watch you walk into the fire after all you have given us?" Her words completely choke me, and I open my mouth to reply but nothing comes out. I don't know what to say or how to reply when my heart is bleeding from such raw wounds.

Months ago, I was nothing to these people, and here they are, trying to convince me that they need me, that they want to stand with me to fight for our pack. I can't take this, it's too intense and I am starting to crumble. I'm no leader, this is proof right here, as I falter and break because my pack decide to disobey me. I have no control over what they choose.

"Don't make us disobey you, Luna, please..... we don't want to dishonor you. We all respect you to the moon and back, but the Alpha he would never see us worthy if we stayed and you went. We belong by your side, as one pack." It's one of the midwives, pushing through the crowd towards me and one of the few of our citizens that has the right to look me in the eye. I have talked with her many times over the months to improve the facilities for birth and the care of newborns, and even witnessed a few under her attentive hand. She's someone who works closely with me when needed and I know her words are from the heart.

"Most of you are not fighters.... You won't survive. You don't know what it's like to come up against them." it's my last-ditch attempt to make them understand the dangers, the almost certain death for many of them, and it's as feeble as it sounds. My body vibrating as I cling on to my last shreds of sanity and composure knowing the crowd is against me as the noise begins to grow from hushed whispers to louder refusals.

"We are more in numbers than they are... we can use that to our advantage, and if some are lost, it's for the good of the pack." It's an elderly wolf, near the last phase of his life cycle. One who has seen many things, endured many battles, many wars, and his soft gaze warms me painfully. "A pack is only a pack when we stand and die together, Luna..... Protecting our previous Luna was denied us and for almost a decade we failed her. We won't stand back and lose you both and do nothing but watch. We as Santos have to redeem ourselves for the things our alpha did in our name. Juan dishonored us and ripped our pack apart; we came here and we began to heal, to bond again..... don't take that from us again by making us fail when it matters."

A sob escapes my lips and I have to cover my mouth with a desperate move to control myself.

Awakening Following Fate by L. T. Marshall Chapter 80

[/ Awakening- Following Fate \(Book 2\) By L. T. Marshall](#)

"Give it up, Luna.... listen to the people. I doubt you can stop them being ready to battle at dawn. Wolves are known to be headstrong when riled. You of all people should know that." Carmen this time, echoes out from the back in that snooty and superior tone which rings true, and I stare at her through watery vision while

I shake my head. She knows this isn't what I want, but it seems she too thinks I'm wrong. Ever bold in saying what she thinks, never beats around the bush.

Meadow is silent, Sierra too, and the will of the people are deafening me even in their sudden silence. I'm defeated. I can feel the rebellion around me, that despite seeing me rightfully as their Luna, they are refusing to follow this one command. I know I won't stand a chance in changing minds, all I can do is make a request. Hope, they listen.

"I won't lead you to death.... but I can't stop you coming. All I can ask is that you be smart. That you think about your skill set and the ones who need you here. Femmes, children, mates... that if you show up to come with me, you know you might not return. Don't come if you know you won't survive it. Don't be a martyr and give your life in vain. Future is as important as the fights we endure today." I have no other way to try and persuade them and I'm grasping at straws, wishing to god Colton was here. He would know what to do, what to say, and god, he would alpha tone them if they continued insisting on this stupid plan. He would never let the word of the pack out rule his decision this way. He would literally make them tremble if they dared question something he ordered. But then, Luna is not Alpha, and her will is soft and gentle, not borne from being a seasoned warrior. Isn't that why they rule as one.

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"I know it wasn't the plan, Chica, but with the numbers..... you can't deny it swings things in our favor." Meadow's caving too, seeing the way the packs swaying to protect me, and she can't argue with it because she never agreed to me going in the first place. Tears rolling down my face as I scan all the lowered heads and try to blot out the sea of emotions invading me from all sides. I can no longer tell what's me and what's them but it's draining and I'm suddenly too tired to keep fighting. I want an end to all of this.

"I'll be by your side. I'm not staying here.... if you die, I'm dead anyway." Sierra shocks me from behind, her voice stable and strong and a hint of fierce I haven't heard from her before. I spin on her, instantly aggressive in my refusal, forgetting everything else when my world comes crumbling down..

"No.. No!!.... Colton would never forgive me, I will never forgive me, for putting you in danger..... You stay here. You belong HERE! No way, Sierra, you don't get to disobey me too. Not on this. Never!" From low and wounded to sudden harsh and commanding, my tears increase tenfold in sheer pleading and I gawp at her in terror.

Sierra catches my hands and pulls me to her, hushing me as subtle hysteria begins to take over. My lungs constrict in panic at the thought of my adopted mom being out there, am*** that, fighting her own, getting hurt. Even a scratch, a tiny knock, and it would slice me to a million pieces. I know our lives are bonded but it's not computing in that way in my brain right now.

"Alora listen to me, you can't turn.... Your gifts are weaker... I can feel it. I know each day they dwindle more, you can't hide it from me. I can heal you if anything happens, I can be your safety net..... let me be that while my son can't."

"No." the floodgates open and the emotions spew out, borne of anxiety, the panic immersing me painfully as Sierra tries and hushes my obvious distress. Pulling me to her warm embrace in a hug, her fingers to my face to softly push my hair back, but I fight to stay locked on her eyes and not back down.

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"We have babies to protect and a son to bring home.... We're not ready to die and I am NOT leaving my baby out there any longer in the cold dark world without me. I did that for too long, its time I was his mother and brought him home like I should have done ten years ago." Her voice stern, her manner strong. Sierra is different from how she's been these months and has seemed to have found an inner fire. I don't care though; she won't be coming with me.

"Your pack is with you, you have no choice, Luna." Tom invades the podium and rests a hand on my shoulder, bringing my attention back to the front and the sight almost ends me. Wolves crowding closer, tears in their eyes as they huddle together, holding their loved ones and nodding in agreement. The room crowding as those who have been linked of the news push in to show they too offer their support. Space filling until not a tiny inch remains, and bodies are crammed out and spilling into the village around the doors.

A hum vibrating through the room and a feeling of unity and acceptance. They're willing to sacrifice all for the good of the pack and tomorrow we won't be two dozen running into the forest, we will be hundreds, whether I want it or not. This is no longer something I can control, and the fates are telling me to let it go. This fight isn't mine alone, and I'm not alone. I haven't been since the day I bonded to Colton and these people became my blood.

"Rest, go home, prepare, decide. Only show up if you won't hinder and only if your loved ones agree. First sun, be at the tree border behind the west rune line." Meadow calls out, dismissing the crowds knowing I will only continue to fight it, and the silence falls heavily as the realization hits everyone that this is really happening. Tomorrow we do something I never thought I would ask of them. We leave the safety of the border; we face off our own, and we mount an offensive on the vampires who have overshadowed us and caused fear to live in our souls for the past six months.

God help us, I hope the fates are paying attention because I could sure use a little help.

They start to shuffle out slowly while I stand like a broken child in Sierra's arms. Overwhelmed and frazzled as my mind finally stops trying to take everything in and I just watch. I have no words left, nothing I can say to sway them. My heart heavier than it's been in a long time, as they go, one by one. Every wolf at the door turns, looks towards me and with a low bow, utters one word.

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'Luna'

They then lower eyes to their feet, before turning and leaving. I'm so touched and beyond comprehension at this sign of respect that I don't know how to react except to stand and stare at every face that honors me and leaves. I want to memorize every single one, just in case. While every bowed head and uttered word tears and claws at my insides so that I cover my stomach instinctively and cradle it protectively. Sniffing, gulping in ragged breaths because I'm too consumed with too many emotions to be able to separate them out.

"And here you thought you would never be part of a real pack or a family.... yet here we are." Meadow glides up beside me and slides an arm around my waist to help hold me up as I breath out the painful truth. Taking me from Sierra gently.

"Most of them will die.... We'll lose them." The breathy words stick in my mouth like peanut b***er, sliding out in woe, and I have to struggle past the agony to get them out at all. Knowing I shouldn't think it, but it's the truth and I have to be a realist.