

His Defiant Mate: The Lycan King's Chosen Luna Chapter 1

Audriana POV:

"I'm sorry, Ms. Sullivan, but Mr. Black's appointment was for half an hour ago."

The clerk's voice was polite, but his eyes held a pity I refused to acknowledge. I glanced at the sleek watch on my wrist. Thirty-two minutes. He was thirty-two minutes late.

"He's on his way," I said, my voice smoother than I felt. My stomach was a tight knot of cold dread.

I stepped away from the polished walnut desk, the scent of lemon cleaner and old paper filling my nose. The North American Inter-Pack Alliance Registry Hall was designed to be imposing, with its marble columns and vaulted ceilings, meant to impress upon werewolves the gravity of the contracts signed here. Today, it just felt cold.

The air conditioning ghosted across my bare arms, raising goosebumps. I unconsciously twisted the delicate silver chain bracelet on my wrist, a nervous habit I'd had since I was a child. The tiny links were cool against my skin.

My phone buzzed in my clutch. A message from my assistant, Maya.

'Apex Ventures deal is ready for your final review. They're getting antsy.'

I typed a quick reply, my fingers flying across the screen.

'Tell them to hold their breath. I'm handling something personal.'

Personal. That's what this was supposed to be. The final step. Gabe and I, registering our intent to bond, a formality before the ceremony that would tie our packs, our families, our futures together.

I closed my eyes for a second, focusing, trying to pull his scent from the air. It was a game we used to play as kids. I could always find him. That familiar, comforting scent of pine and damp earth.

But all I could smell now was a cacophony of strangers-stale coffee, cloying perfume, the metallic tang of anxiety from a dozen other wolves waiting in this sterile hall. A wave of nausea rolled through me. Something was wrong.

My phone buzzed again. Not a work message this time. An unknown number.

The message was short, brutal.

'VIP Lounge 3. He's waiting for you.'

My breath hitched. VIP Lounge 3. I knew the layout of this building. It was at the end of the private corridor, reserved for Alphas of significant standing. Gabe's father had used it last year to finalize a trade agreement.

My fingers tightened around my phone. It was a trap. A cruel joke. It had to be.

But the knot in my stomach pulled tighter, a cold, hard certainty.

I pushed open the heavy glass door that separated the main hall from the private corridors. The sound of the bustling hall was instantly muffled by the thick, plush carpet. My heels sank into the crimson pile with each step, silencing my approach.

As I moved down the hallway, a new scent cut through the sterile air.

Cherry blossom. Sickly sweet and artificial.

Hailee's scent.

My steps slowed. My heart, which had been hammering against my ribs, gave a painful lurch and then seemed to stop altogether. It couldn't be. She was my cousin. She was supposed to be my maid of honor.

I reached the door. Room 3. It was heavy, dark redwood, and slightly ajar. Just a crack.

Through the gap, in the dim, intimate lighting of the lounge, I saw them. Two figures, tangled together on a leather sofa.

Gabe.

His hand was buried in her blonde hair, the same way he used to touch mine. Hailee's head was thrown back, her laughter a low, throaty sound that made my blood run cold.

The world narrowed to that sliver of a view. The sound of my own blood roaring in my ears drowned out everything else.

I didn't think. I acted.

My hand shot out and slammed the door open. It crashed against the interior wall with a sound like a gunshot.

They sprang apart, their faces a blur of shock and panic. Gabe scrambled to his feet, his shirt rumpled, his face flushed.

"Audriana! What the hell are you doing?"

Hailee, true to form, immediately dissolved into a picture of terrified innocence. She shrank behind Gabe, her eyes wide and already filling with tears. "Audri, it's not what it looks like."

A laugh escaped my lips, but it was a harsh, ugly sound. "Not what it looks like? You're half an hour late to our registration, and I find you with your tongue down my cousin's throat. Please, Gabe. Enlighten me."

"You were following me?" he roared, his voice bouncing off the wood-paneled walls. He took a step forward, trying to use his Alpha presence to intimidate me, to make me shrink. It was a tactic that had stopped working years ago.

"Don't be stupid," I snapped, my voice like ice. "I can smell her on you. You reek of cheap perfume and betrayal."

Hailee let out a sob. "We couldn't help it! The bond... it's just so strong between us. We never meant to hurt you."

The bond. She dared to speak of the bond.

I ignored her, my eyes locked on Gabe. On the man I had loved since we were children. The man my wolf had recognized. The man who was supposed to be my future.

"Give me an answer, Gabe," I said, my voice dangerously quiet. "A real one. Now."

He looked from my face to Hailee's tear-streaked one. She gave a little whimper and tugged on his arm, the perfect damsel in distress. And in that moment, I saw his decision. His jaw tightened. His eyes, which I once thought held the whole world, turned to stone.

"I, Gabe Black, Alpha of the Blackwater Pack," he began, his voice formal and loud, ringing with the ancient power of the rite.

The air in the room crackled. The words were a physical force, slamming into me.

"Reject you, Audriana Sullivan, as my mate."

Pain. It wasn't emotional. It was physical. A spear of white-hot agony that started in my chest and ripped through every nerve in my body. It felt like my soul was being torn in two. My breath was stolen from my lungs. My knees threatened to buckle.

I bit down on my lower lip, hard. The coppery taste of blood filled my mouth. I would not scream. I would not cry. I would not give them the satisfaction.

My fingernails dug into the soft leather of my clutch, the leather groaning under the pressure.

For a flicker of a second, I saw something in Gabe's eyes. A flash of regret. Of pain. But it was quickly smothered by the cold, hard wall of his decision. Hailee's hand was on his arm, a triumphant possessiveness in her touch.

I forced myself to stand taller, to straighten my spine, even as the world tilted around me. I met his gaze, and I let him see the abyss that had just opened between us.

I cleared my throat, my voice a raw, broken thing. But it was steady.

"I, Audriana Sullivan," I rasped, each word costing me a piece of my shattered soul, "accept your rejection."

The bond snapped.

It was a sound no one else could hear, but for me, it was a cataclysm. A final, brutal severing. The pain intensified for a blinding moment, then settled into a deep, hollow ache that I knew would never truly leave.

Behind Gabe, Hailee's lips curved into a small, victorious smile.

I looked at them, and in that moment, the labels fell away-fiancé, cousin, family-until all that remained were two strangers, standing on the ruins of my life. Two pieces of trash I had found on the side of the road.

Worthless.

Without another word, I turned my back on the wreckage of my life. I walked out of the room, my steps even and measured, down the long, silent corridor, and away from the man who had just ripped my heart out of my chest.