

INTENDED BONDMATES

D. LIEBER



“Wake up!” Mikhail demanded at the foot of my bed as he kicked me awake.

I cracked my sleep-crusted lids and peeked at him. He was pristine as always. His golden hair was artfully arranged, and he wore black trousers with a black waistcoat over a white shirt. His tie was the same color as his fiery-blue eyes, which squinted at me.

I didn’t need the bond to tell he was irritated I wasn’t already on my feet. I turned my head to look out the dingy curtains.

“It’s still dark.” I yawned and rolled out of bed.

He turned his back to my half-clothed state.

“Of course, it is still dark. Father and Mother would never allow us to leave if they knew where we are going,” he chided like it was obvious.

“And where is that?” I asked, rubbing my eyes as I scouted my bedroom floor for a decently clean pair of pants.

He grumbled under his breath about having a useless bondmate and then sighed. “We are going to the Wolf Council. I wrote to them a while ago to request we be unbound early, and they have granted us an audience.”

The shoe I was about to pull on thumped to the floor as it slipped through my fingers. Mikhail looked over his shoulder at the sound.

"Mikhail, I know we aren't well-matched bondmates, but it isn't that long before your awakening. Can't you hold out until then?" I pleaded.

"I have been forced to suffer your presence far longer than I have patience for. I am lucky I could even find a worthy mate like Colleen with your low-class stench surrounding me like a cloud of noxious gas. You *will* accompany me to the Wolf Council and agree to be unbound from me as soon as they will allow."

As his words slashed into me, I barely felt the pain. I'd long become familiar with their sting over the last thirteen years. I stifled a sigh, resigning myself to his will as I finished dressing.

"And pack a bag. I doubt you will be returning," he ordered.

I filled my rucksack with my small supply of clothes and shouldered it. It was packed so tight I couldn't fit anything else. I even had to leave behind my hairbrush and toothbrush.

We exited the dark, quiet mansion via the servants' entrance and walked softly through the complex to the depot. The conductor waited for us inside the large, wooden structure.

"Thank you for meeting us so early. Can I rely on your discretion?" Mikhail asked the conductor.

"Of course, Sir," he assured. He motioned us into the transportation circle and asked, "Where to?"

"Lupine City Hall," Mikhail told him.

He nodded and began whispering the spell. As the soft command flowed from his lips, the circle started to glow with yellow light. There was a blinding flash, and we stood in another circle in another depot.

As we exited the depot amongst a crowd of morning commuters, it was obvious we were no longer on his family's

estate. The solid, stone structures of Lupine City were a far cry from the picturesque architecture of his family complex. Dawn was just lighting the eastern horizon as we approached the imposing edifice that was Lupine City Hall.

Our footsteps echoed off the marble floors and walls of the entrance hall. Many archways led to other rooms, and there was a marble staircase to the right.

"How may I help you?" a receptionist asked from behind a desk to the left of the entrance.

"We have an audience with the Wolf Council this morning," Mikhail explained.

"Runa and Mikhail?" the receptionist asked after consulting a schedule book.

I felt my jaw tighten as Mikhail's irritation shot through the bond. He nodded at the receptionist.

He can't stand that they put my name first.

The receptionist gave us directions to the council chambers and told us to wait until we were called. We climbed the marble staircase and took a seat outside a set of huge, polished wooden doors. I slouched beside Mikhail on the stone bench. He squinted his displeasure at my posture, although he kept his criticism to himself for once. *As if I need him to rebuke me aloud to know how he's feeling.* I sighed and tried not to think too much, but my mind flew off in multiple directions.

Why is Mikhail doing this now? What's going to happen to me? I have always known he resented me for Isla's death. It's not like I really wanted to be bound with him either, but what else could I have done in that situation? I was young and impressionable, not to mention grief-stricken and scared. At least I can say I tried to be a good bondmate to him. Where can I go if they agree to unbind us? My pack won't allow me to return a failure.

A no-nonsense young man interrupted my thoughts when he opened the chamber doors and called, "Runa and Mikhail?"

My pulse quickened with Mikhail's resurfaced irritation. We stood and stepped forward.

The man met my eyes with disapproval and motioned to us. We followed him inside, and he took a seat near a long table, readying to take notes. The table was occupied by thirteen alphas in human form, one from each of the thirteen families. Two court security officers in wolf form stood guard by the door we had entered.

Three chairs faced the table. My pack's alpha sat in the chair to the left. I hadn't seen her in thirteen years, but I would recognize her presence anywhere. She turned her amber eyes on me when I reached her, and I immediately dropped to my knees and bowed my head.

She patted my head as she said my name. I glanced up, and her eyes softened with pity.

Mikhail, on the other hand, looked on in shock. His mouth hung open at my show of respect. *I've never shown him such respectful obedience. All he ever got was resignation.*

Mikhail and I each took a seat. I resisted the urge to fidget under the oppressive stares of the alphas as I awaited my fate.

"Runa of the Mountain Meadows Clan, you were called here at the request of your bondmate, who wishes to be unbound before his awakening. Do you have anything to say?" the alpha in the middle asked.

"As always, I will bend to my faeling's will in all ways that will not compromise his safety," I responded.

The alpha nodded and turned to Mikhail.

"Mikhail of the noble house Azure, why have you requested to be unbound from Runa? Are you not to awaken in three months?"

Mikhail rose to address the council, and I ducked my head at the disrespect. Soft growls from the court security officers behind us told him to sit down. He complied smoothly and spoke as though nothing had happened.

"Honorable alphas, I submitted this request over a year ago. In my opinion, Runa and I are poorly-matched. Indeed, she was not even my intended bondmate. She was bound with

me in response to tragic circumstances and as a matter of convenience. My parents should have resubmitted my application for a bondmate upon Isla's death rather than binding me with Runa."

"We understand your distress at losing your intended bondmate," an alpha toward the left chimed in. "However, that does not answer why you believe Runa is unfit. Has she not protected you as is her duty?"

"She has protected me from minor threats but has never been tested against our true enemy while bound with me. I am to be mated shortly after my awakening. I fear Runa's presence, since she is not of an equal status, may disrupt these plans."

"Mikhail, we are reluctant to grant a request that would leave you vulnerable to vampire attack so close to your awakening. Would it not be better to wait to break your bond at your awakening? Then, you can realize your full magic and protect yourself. You are aware that as you approach your awakening and your magic ripens, the increased magic in your blood will make your scent stronger and more appetizing to them?" the alpha in the middle cautioned.

Mikhail waved his hand dismissively. "I am well aware. However, my parents' estate has hired wolf guards. I assure you, I am quite safe."

The alphas conferred amongst themselves for a while, and I remained painfully still. After much debate, the center alpha addressed Mikhail. "Very well, we will grant your request."

"Thank you." Mikhail bowed his head from his seat.

"Elva, do you have a proposal for what we should do with Runa?"

My alpha nodded. "It is by no fault of Runa's that she was born to a working-class pack, and even he has admitted that she has done her duty. Before she was bound with Mikhail, she was intended for another faeling of a similar class to ours. I suggest, if the faeling's family is amiable, she be bound with

her intended bondmate. It is my understanding he was never bound, and his awakening is also fast approaching.”

The council deliberated once more. Eventually, the center alpha said, “Excellent suggestion, Elva. We will dispatch a message to the faeling’s family. In the meantime, please escort these two to be unbound.”