

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha – Mindlinks 16 |

Chapter 16

Aria's POV

Justin was there, flanked by two broad-shouldered men in dark suits.

"You need to leave. Now. Don't make us escort you out," Justin said.

"I'm seeing Damon today," I said, standing straight. "I'm not leaving until I *do*."

"Then I'm sorry." He gave a slight nod.

The two men stepped forward. Just as their hands were about to close on my arms, I spoke.

"Justin, you owe me a favor. That experimental serum, remember?"

Justin went still.

"Mrs. Hawthorne... that was you?"

A memory. His young daughter, months ago, burning with a sudden, terrifying fever the best pediatric healers couldn't break. A miracle vial of experimental serum, delivered anonymously. It had **saved** her life.

Justin was silent for a long moment. Then he waved the guards back.

"Mr. Hawthorne isn't here." He wouldn't quite meet my eyes. "He's on a video call. It ends at eleven, then he's heading to the garage. He has dinner plans."

He didn't help me. Not directly. But he gave me what I needed—information.

His debt, repaid.

I went down to the parking garage and waited, feeling like I was walking toward my own execution.

At exactly 11 AM, the private elevator chimed. Damon emerged, surrounded by a cluster of senior VPs, all talking in low, serious tones.

He saw me immediately—leaning against the driver's side door of his Maybach.

His step faltered. A frown carved itself between his brows.

He dismissed the others with a gesture and walked toward the car alone

"Move" He didn't even look at me

"We need to talk I didn't budge.

"You and I have nothing to talk about

"I am your mate," I said, lifting my chin to meet his gaze

"**Mate?**" He actually laughed – a short, humorless sound, like he was mocking me for even daring to use

that word.

+25 Pointe

In the next heartbeat, **his** hand shot out. Fingers like steel bands closed around my

throat, slamming me back against the cold metal of the car.

"Say that again," he hissed, violence crackling in the air

Black spots danced at the edges of my vision. I clawed at his wrist, a futile struggle. Just as the world started to tunnel into darkness, a single, scalding tear escaped, *tracking* down my cheek and landing on the back of his hand.

It sizzled like acid.

He recoiled as if burned, releasing me so suddenly I stumbled. I braced myself against the car, coughing, dragging in ragged gulps of air.

Damon stared at his own hand, trembling slightly. That familiar, vicious tearing sensation in his chest was back, sharper than ever.

I felt it.

How absurd. I'd endured the tearing pain of breaking the mate bond—and still, I'd failed. I could still feel him. Still feel Damon and his inexplicable heartbreak.

"Tell me." When I could finally speak, my voice came out raspy. My eyes burned—but I held steady. "What do you want from me? What will it take for you to let Grayson Group go? I'll pay any price. For Grayson."

"Any price?"

He stared at me for a long moment, then a cruel smile touched his lips. "Fine. Justin, take her to change before she gets in the car."

Ten minutes later, I stood by the rear door, tugging at the hem of my dress.

"Justin. Tell her."

Justin glanced at me. "Mrs. Hawthorne, tonight's dinner is a big one. The mayor's hosting it himself- pushing the Hawthorne Group project through. Most of the guests will be our partners."

I turned my head. Damon's profile was all sharp edges, carved from ice.

"So. My voice came out flat. "You want me to close the deal for you."

It hit me then—a cold, hollow realization. This wasn't a normal dinner And I wasn't a guest I was the dish being served

"Changed your mind? Then get the hell out Now"

I didn't hesitate I opened the rear door and got in before he could change his mind

The space was too close. His scent cold alpine air and something darker filled it The memory lived in my very celis, made my skin prickle My throat throbbed where his fingers had been

"Diessed like a warning sign," he remarked, catching my eye in the rearview mirror Trying to get

someone's attention?"

How ridiculous. Wasn't he the one who just made me change and come to this dinner with him?

Tapter

I didn't answer. I just watched the city blur past.

+75 Purita

The car stopped in front of an exclusive, members-only club. Damon led me to a private dining room. When the door opened, the man at the head of the table wasn't *alone*. Seated beside him, smiling like she owned the place, was Claudia.

The air in the private dining room was thick with unspoken games.

Justin quietly told me the man at the head of the table was Dave Thorne, Alpha of a powerful coastal pack -a client Damon needed. His eyes locked onto me the moment I walked in and didn't let go.

"Damon, who's this?" Dave's gaze was a physical crawl over my skin.

LUCK **DRAW** >

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Aria's POV

"My wife." Damon said the two words flatly, then took the seat *next to* Claudia, silently endorsing Dave's assumption that she was his companion for the evening.

The sting was sharp and precise.

I took the seat farthest from Damon, as far from the head of the table as I could get.

This is a transaction, I told myself. Feel nothing.

Dinner was served. Wine flowed.

Damon was attentive to Claudia in a way that carved pieces out of me.

He selected food for her plate. When someone tried to pass her a glass of wine, he intercepted it with a smooth, "She's not feeling her best tonight," and downed it himself.

That tenderness was a foreign country—one I'd never been allowed to visit.

Emboldened, Dave shifted seats, planting himself next to me.

His arm, heavy and possessive, draped over the back of my chair, his fingers brushing my shoulder.

"Mrs. Hawthorne," he slurred slightly, his breath reeking of expensive bourbon.

"Heard a lot about you. Can't let the night pass without a proper toast."

I shifted subtly, dislodging his touch, and picked up my wine glass. "Mr. Thorne."

Across the table, Damon watched.

A faint, cold smirk played on his lips. He was waiting—waiting to see how low I would go.

As the main course was cleared, Dave slid a thick contract to the center of the table

"You've got a deal, Damon." He pointed a thick finger at a sealed bottle of cognac in the

center of the table Premium And lethal. "If the lady drinks that whole bottle."

Every eye turned to me.

It was 104 proof cognac—meant to be savored over months, not downed in one sitting

I looked at the bottle Then I looked at Damon

He was leaning back in his chair, swirling the amber liquid in his own **glass**, watching the play of light He offered no objection

No rescue

I understood my role perfectly

hapter

stood up. I picked up the bottle. I didn't bother with a glass.

I put it to my lips and drank.

The fire hit my throat, then my stomach—a spreading inferno.

I drank methodically, ignoring the burn, the way my eyes watered, the rising nausea.

It's all for Grayson, I told myself quietly.

I didn't stop until the bottle was empty.

Thud.

I set the empty bottle on the table with more force than I intended. The sound echoed.

"The contract, Mr. Thorne."

Dave stared, then let out a booming, impressed laugh.

"Hell of a woman, Damon! Okay, okay. You got it."

"Thank you, Mr. Thorne." I managed a stiff nod.

Then a cramp twisted through my abdomen. My stomach was a writhing, toxic pit.

"Excuse me—restroom." I rose, turned, and walked out as calmly as I could.

+25 Parts

The moment the stall *door* closed behind me, I fell to my knees and vomited violently into the toilet, my body convulsing, trying *to* expel the poison.

My vision swam.

I fumbled for my phone, thinking of Astrid, but the screen was a blur of light.

That's when I heard the distinct click of the main restroom door locking.

Dave Thorne stood there, blocking the only exit, a leering grin on his flushed face

"Leaving so soon, sweetheart?"

I pushed myself up, leaning heavily against the tiled wall

"Mr Thorne, control yourself."

"Control myself?" He lunged, his hand tangling in my hair, yanking my head back painfully **as** he slammed me against the wall

"Who are you kidding? You think Damon brought you here for your sparkling conversation? He gave you to **me** A gift

The words didn't just hurt they obliterated something inside me

The final humiliation.

And Damon had orchestrated it

+25 Pcuits

In that moment of shattered understanding, Dave's other hand grabbed the neckline of my dress and Tipped.

"**Get** OFF me!" I fought, kicking, scratching, but he was too strong, fueled by booze and entitlement.

A backhanded slap cracked across my face, the coppery taste of blood filling my mouth.

Pure, animal desperation took over.

My hand, flailing, found the heavy crystal soap dispenser on the counter

Damon's POV

The car door closed, sealing in Claudia's vapid chatter about the wine.

I wasn't listening.

My mind was stuck on an image: Aria's fingers, trembling just slightly, as she lifted that bottle. And her eyes afterward—empty. Dead.

"Damon? You're miles away."

"Nothing."

I ripped my tie loose, the constriction in my chest becoming a physical agony, a rending, tearing feeling deep inside me.

It was insane.

Why the hell should I care about that manipulative woman?

The driver pulled into traffic. We'd gone less than two blocks when I snapped.

"Stop the **car**."

"Damon?" Claudia sounded confused.

I was already out, striding back toward the club, a cold, sick certainty coiling in my gut

The hallway to the private dining rooms was **quiet**. Too quiet

Then I heard it—from behind the closed door of the women's restroom A muffled thud A choked sound A man's crude curse

Something in me exploded

LUCK DRAW

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Chapter 18

Damon's POV

I didn't think. My leg drew back, and I kicked—just beside the lock—with everything I had. The door flew open.

And the scene inside stopped my heart.

Dave had her pinned. Aria's red dress was barely a dress anymore—just strips of fabric clinging to her skin.

Angry red marks bloomed across her arms, her shoulders. Bruises were already *forming*, dark against **the** impossible pallor of her skin.

For one heartbeat, the world went silent.

Them—a roar filled my ears. It took me a second to realize it was coming from me. From Rhein.

I crossed the room in two strides.

A fury I'd never known I possessed sent my fist into Dave's face. I felt the impact travel up my **arm**—bone against bone, the give of flesh.

I heard his jaw crack.

But this—this wasn't enough.

Rhein was screaming now, a sound that vibrated through my ribs, clawing at the inside of my skin. I needed more.

Fist after fist.

He went down. I went down with him. My knuckles split—I didn't feel it.

Punch. Punch. Punch.

This was for touching her.

This was for the look **in** her eyes.

This was for every damn thing

Blood splattered Dave's cries gurgled, then stopped.

The silence that followed was thick, heavy and then I heard it

Quiet sobbing Small Broken it must have been going on the whole time

That voice

Faint. Shredded.

My fist froze mid-air I turned

apter

28 Points

Aria was huddled in the corner, knees drawn up, the torn remains of her dress pressed to her chest like the only thing she had left.

Something hit me in the chest—dull, heavy. The air left my lungs.

I shrugged off my jacket and walked toward her.

"Don't touch me."

She flinched back as my hand reached for her. Her whole body curled inward, like she was trying to disappear.

No screams. No hysteria.

Just that silence.

Just a terrifying, hollow coldness in her gaze.

My hand hung there, suspended between us.

"Let me take you home, okay?"

"No."

She gathered the shreds of fabric, wrapping them around herself like a pathetic shield.

Then she looked up at me.

Like I **was** a stranger. Worse—like I was nothing.

The smirk at the corner of her mouth tore through me.

"Wasn't the rescue mission a little off-script, Mr. Hawthorne?"

"Aria..."

"Don't." Her voice was chips of ice. "I was just the toy you gave Dave, wasn't I? So.

She stopped herself.

"Don't say my name. It makes me sick."

Then she walked past me.

Barefoot, holding herself together with sheer will, she walked out of the ruined room and down the hall without a single backward glance

I stood there

It **hurt**

The tearing in my chest **was** worse than anything I'd ever suffered on the battlefield
Deeper Colder

It felt like something important was slipping through my fingers and I couldn't hold onto it

Don't let her go! Rhein roared inside me

+25 Points

Yes... I should follow her.

I had to.

Without hesitation, turned and caught up to her.

"Let go of me." She didn't turn around.

"Aria, about tonight-" I stepped in front of her, reaching for words that weren't there.

A cold laugh cut me off.

Moonlight fell across her face. Pale. Cold. Unreachable.

"Mr. Hawthorne, don't tell me you've had a change of heart."

I frowned. "I didn't know Dave would-

"Try to r**e me?" The laugh that escaped her was short, savage. "Of course you did."

She stepped closer—close enough to touch, close enough to destroy me. She tilted her head back and looked at me.

Her gaze could have frozen hell itself.

"You took me there to humiliate me. To have me broken down. To show me the cost of crossing you."

"You know exactly what kind of man Dave is."

My throat worked. No sound came out.

"So spare me the hero act." Her voice dropped to a whisper—each word a tiny, precise dagger.

"You came back because you're not done playing with your toy. You didn't want it broken by someone else."

"After all... I still have some use, right?"

"That's ENOUGH!" The words were ripped from me, raw, almost a snarl "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Then what should I say?"

Her eyes finally glistened but she refused to let the tears fall

"Thank you, Mr. Hawthorne, for your mercy? Or should I get back on my knees and beg you to spare Grayson Group?"

We stood there, chests heaving, in a silence louder than any argument

Then she spoke Her voice was terrifyingly calm

"Damon Let's get divorced"

She said it. Again.

Every syllable sharp. Clear. Undeniable.

"This marriage was a mistake from the start. You hate me. And I'm... done."

"No more waiting. Let's just end this right now. I'll be at the courthouse tomorrow morning."

She left.

I stood rooted to the spot.

The agony in my chest—clawing, ripping—tore a wail from Rhein. Again. And again.

This was what I wanted.

So why—why did it hurt this much?

It tore me completely in two.

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Chapter 19

Damon's POV

We came back to the estate in the dead of night.

The front door slammed shut before the engine had even cooled. She didn't look back. Just walked- straight through the hall, up the stairs, and into the master bathroom. The door didn't just close. It exploded.

In all her months as a Hawthorne, Aria had never raised her voice. Never pushed back.

So when it finally happened...

I stood there. A panic I'd never known seized me by the throat.

This feeling—it was like drowning. I had to fix it. Now.

With a bowl of hangover soup on a tray, I turned the handle and stepped inside.

She was at the mirror. Back to me. Watching.

Not me—I wasn't there anymore. She was watching whatever was left of us, reflected in her own cold

stare.

And then it came back. Not a thought. A memory.

A younger girl. Simple white dress. The first time she looked at me, her eyes were full of light.

So much light.

Now?

Ashes. Just ashes.

Aria's POV

'Get out'

He didn't move

He filled the bathroom doorway, still in his shirt from the club, the collar torn where he'd yanked it open. Blood darkened his knuckles. Dave's, probably.

I'd never seen him like this. So ruined. And that look in his eyes I'd never seen that before. Ever.

He was studying me like he was trying to solve a problem he hadn't known existed.

A problem? That's what I really am.

I looked back at the mirror. It showed me what I'd become.

apter

+25 Powis

The red dress hung in shreds. My jaw throbbed where the bruise was spreading. The blood at my mouth had **dried**—but I could still taste it.

I looked exactly like what I was. Something used and then inconveniently survived.
A trashed woman.

"What's wrong, Alpha Damon? Wasn't tonight humiliating enough for *you*? You want another round?"

I spoke to him—my mate, my abuser—reflected in the glass

"Go on. What's next? Just punish me directly. Isn't that what tonight was all about?"

Damon's face darkened.

"Aria, who are you throwing this tantrum for?!"

"Don't forget—this was the deal you asked for! Don't stand there playing the victim! Besides, Dave didn't even do anything to you!"

"Didn't do anything to me?"

I looked down at my own ruined body and felt my heart sink into deep water—drowning, gasping for air.

"So what you're saying is—I'd only have the right to feel wronged if Dave had actually finished the **r**e**?"

"Or are *you* saying—you wouldn't care even if he had?"

A bitter laugh escaped my throat.

"It must be this. You just want me to know that being your mate means nothing to you—right? That's it, isn't it?"

"You're still paying me *back* for forcing you into this marriage two years ago. For taking the name 'Mrs. Hawthorne. You want me under your heel. You want to grind my pride into dust. You want me to regret ever existing in your life. Don't you?"

"Congratulations, Damon." I held his gaze. "You did it. I know now. I understand exactly **what** I am to you

"Nothing, right?"

In his eyes, I was just nothing

Damon—I regret it! If I could go back, I'd rather have never met you at all!

The air around him turned cold so cold it burned

Damon's hand shot out, fingers clamping down on my jaw The vein at his temple bulged His **eyes** were a storm—dark, raging, barely contained

"Aria Say that again

"I said—"

"I regret it!"

+25 Points

"All of it. Every single day I spent in this house, waiting for something that was never going to happen. If I could go back, I would never have let myself do that. I'd stay far away from you. I should have, from day

one!"

Something cracked open in his face and then twisted.

"How dare you?" His claws dug in deeper, piercing my skin.

Then the Alpha command hit.

It rolled off him in waves, slammed into my chest, crushed my spine, drove me to my knees all at once.

My body wanted to fold. Wanted to give. I shoved my palm flat against the wall and held.

Held everything.

No more. No more bottomless submission. No more apologies. No more giving in.

Damon. I won't love you anymore.

I looked straight at him. My body was bending under the weight of it. "Let's cut the matebond again."

His grip tightened. For a moment, I felt like my bones were about to be crushed.

I didn't yield.

"I." The pressure was a living thing now, wrapping around my throat, my ribs. But I had come too far **to** stop. "Don't. Love. You. Anymore."

Then, slowly, he let go.

The Alpha pressure collapsed like something severed. He stepped back. His face had gone the color of ash, his chest heaving like he'd run a mile.

I thought it was over.

My torture. My broken marriage. My unrequited love.

All done.

I didn't understand how wrong I was until his hand snapped around my wrist

He moved fast, and I understood too late to stop it. The Alpha dominance detonated out of him again, **raw** this time, just pure force. The backs of my legs hit the tub I was falling Porcelain caught my spine itell

into the tub

The surface was too slick to get a grip on Every time I tried to push up, my handa sind

He had the showerhead in his hand above my head, and he turned it on

The water hit the crown of my head and ran down my face and into my mouth I couldn't breathe choked on it, tap water and tears mixing somewhere in the back of my throat and when I finally dragged art in it came out wrong and ragged and too loud

"You don't get to say it's over"

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aple

+25 Points

He stood above me, shirt dark with water. "You made yourself part of my life. My pack. My name. That **doesn't** end just because you've decided it does."

"You deserve every ounce of this."

I pushed the wet hair out of my eyes and tried to get up, but he pushed me back down.

"Why?!" I shouted. "I saved you—why do you always have to be so cruel to me?!"

"Saved me?" He let out a cold laugh. "Aria. Just stop with your little games."

"Five years ago." My voice came out steadier. "The Northern Wastes. The Ashmark summit. **The** ice-wolf ambush."

LUCK **DRAW** >

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Chapter 20

Aria's POV

The hand holding the showerhead trembled. Just once. But he didn't turn the water off. He just stood there, letting it fall.

"You were separated from your wolves. You were unconscious for six hours, on the verge of death." I looked up at him from the cold water rising around my thighs. "I fed *you* my blood."

"**It** was me." The desperation in my voice surprised me. I collapsed while I was out looking for herbs for you. When I came back, you were gone—only the scent of wolves remained. Your pack *had* taken you."

I

"I know what it looked like. I know what the sky looked like at hour three when the cloud cover broke, and the temperature dropped another six degrees."

A cold laugh escaped Damon. "Still drunk out of your mind, Aria. Still trying to play me?"

"Five years ago—Claudia saved me. Not you."

"She wasn't there." My voice sounded as hollow as my claim.

Even I barely believed myself.

No proof. No evidence. Just my word—and what was that worth?

It was almost laughable. Almost.

'She described the pass. She described it exactly.' He looked almost impatient.

"Then she described something she heard from someone else." I wiped the water off my face with the back of my hand. A hollow laugh escaped me.

Bang!

His answer came in a single, brutal sound—the showerhead tearing through air, then metal against bone

It hit my shin. Hard. Direct. Like he'd aimed.

The world went white. **Then** red. Then **nothing**.

Pain—sharp, splintering—ripped through me before my mind could even name it

When I could see again, he was already above me Looking down Always looking down

"Aria Last warning Drop the act"

His voice was ice His eyes were colder

"Claudia was there She held my hand when I woke She stayed You didn't

"if you're going to play drunk- then stay here until you're sober

The words hit harder than the showerhead ever could

didn't move. Didn't speak. Just sat there in the cold water, letting it numb everything it could reach.

Because what was left to say?

He'd already decided. Years ago. Tonight. Always.

He left.

The door hit the frame hard enough to rattle the mirror.

I sat on the floor, pulling my knees up to my chest and wrapping my arms *around* them.

I wasn't crying anymore. I'd run out of tears somewhere around the second *hour* of that dinner. Or maybe the third.

Then, the water went cold.

The blood on my lip had dried into a crust.

Everything blurred together after a while.

My wolf had gone quiet.

Since I'd walked out of that bathroom, she wasn't snarling anymore.

Wasn't clawing.

She was just... done.

I reached up and turned the water off. Water dripped from my dress and my hair.

I wrung out the hem, pushed myself up, and changed into sweats without looking at the mirror.

I lay down on top of the covers and stared at the ceiling.

I listened to the house settle back into silence and told myself, Tomorrow. Courthouse.

I held onto that thought like a lifeline.

It was the only solid thing I had left. I don't know when I stopped thinking and started dreaming, but somewhere between the two, the fever found me.

I woke up broken. Heat that didn't come from the shower, but lived in your bones and veins. Then Amy's voice came, low and urgent, from somewhere far away Then another voice, cutting through the fog

"Why didn't you come to me immediately?"

I forced my eyes open looked at the clock, and saw it **was** 4 in the morning

The room swam at the edges

Damon stood beside the bed, his white shirt's **sleeves** shoved up and collar open

Dark circles under **his** eyes He looked like he'd been awake all night

But not for **me**. For Claudia

hapter 20-

+know it all too well.

+25 Points

~"Mr. Hawthorne, I tried to tell you—Mrs. Hawthorne has a terrible fever." Amy's voice was careful, nervous.

"You were in your offree And your phone... it wouldn't go through."

I saw his hands clench, and a muscle in his cheek jumped.

Then he asked, "How long until the fever breaks?"

"We've given her a shot. Normally, it should go down in about half an hour," the pack doctor answered.

Amy stood by the bed, still uneasy. "But last time she had a fever, it didn't break all night. I'm worried this time might be—"

"Fever?" Damon turned to her. "When did she have a fever before?"

Amy hesitated. Then, quietly: "It was the night of the family dinner. Mrs. Hawthorne came back soaked through from the rain. That same night, the fever hit. I called you then, too—but *no* one answered."

Damon didn't move.

He went completely still.

Then—a du!! pain struck my chest.

Our mate bond is still there. Of course I can feel his pain.

But this isn't his.

I know it all too well.

Damon Hawthorne doesn't ache for me.

This pain—it's mine.

How pathetic.

I'm still aching for him.

LUCK DRAW >